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## Trust Talks Episode #26: Building Opportunity, Block by Block

**Maryah Phillips:** Welcome to Trust Talk's 26th episode. I am Maryah Phillips, the program manager of the Neighborhood Capital Fund. It is my utmost pleasure to host three incredible people who all shape and influence community development in their own unique ways. We Rise Together prided itself on evaluation, and what we are most known for is our Mastercard data that is showing us how these new physical assets are influencing spending patterns in their surrounding areas. Fascinating data indeed, but only tells a fraction of what's really happening at the neighborhood level. What this conversation explores are the stories that exist within and even beyond the walls of these beautiful buildings you'll hear about shortly. Before we dive into conversation, please, I'd love to hear from you all. If you could just share with the folks listening, your name and your role in your organization. I'll start with you, Brenda.

**Brenda Palms:** Good morning. Thank you so much for this opportunity to have a chat with you on Trust Talks. My name is Brenda Palms, and I'm the president & CEO of the North Lawndale Employment Network and the founder of our social enterprises, Sweet Beginnings and our beelove cafe.

**Jesse Iñiguez:** Thank you, Maryah. My name is Jesse Iñiguez, and I am the founder of Back of the Yards Coffee and the principal and founder of Back of the Yards Works.

**Katherine Faydash:** Thanks, Maryah. I'm Katherine Faydash, and I'm an affiliated researcher with UIC Great Cities Institute.

**Maryah Phillips:** Now, Brenda and Jesse, you both are deeply invested in your neighborhoods in many ways. You both created a space in your neighborhood bringing people together around coffee. Tell me, why coffee? Why not pizza? And why a physical space around coffee?

**Jesse Iñiguez:** Yeah. So, for me, it was a number of things. I think there just wasn't any coffee shops in my community, period. On top of that, there weren't any or very few third spaces like a coffee shop anywhere near Back of the Yards. And to me, first time I walked into a coffee shop was my freshman year of college, and what it represented to me was a space where I can go and hang out.

I grew up in a household with eight siblings, we didn't have much privacy, much space to do homework or things like that. So, a coffee shop allowed me the peace, allowed me the space, and I asked myself, "Why don't we have something like this in my community?" And finally, a few years later, I had the opportunity to bring a space like that to my neighborhood and I took advantage, and here we are ten years later.

**Brenda Palms:** My story is similar in some ways to Jesse's, in that North Lawndale is a community that just at the time didn't have places where you could hang out at a coffee shop. But it was also an important strategy for our organization to create safe family-friendly spaces where people can have an extraordinary coffee experience, but it was also about creating jobs. What's interesting to me is that we've actually been able to create these new positions as baristas in the neighborhood, hire people locally while giving them probably what they don't always expect, which is just this wide variety of coffee experiences and tea, of course, and sandwiches and all the other stuff that goes with it. But it is exciting to see community coming together and hanging out, and I think probably most importantly where they feel they belong.

**Maryah Phillips:** Thank you all for sharing your stories. Katherine, I'm curious, what are you hearing from your conversations with local residents experiencing this new addition to their neighborhood? What do these spaces make people feel?

**Katherine Faydash:** Yeah. So, I went out to a lot of different public events and spaces and places like this in neighborhoods over the past summer and people were really excited. I think one of the things that we heard most was exactly reflecting what Brenda and Jesse are saying. People were looking for spaces to express themselves, to gather together, to feel seen. Things that I have several people who talk to me about just feeling like this is something that they really wanted in their space, in their neighborhood. So, not having to travel. People were talking a lot about having a third space and access to that close to home.

**Maryah Phillips:** And Kathy, can you tell us what a third space means?

**Katherine Faydash:** A third space is essentially a space that allows for community gathering. It doesn't necessarily require you to spend money, although it can. It's a place where you can feel peace, like Jesse said, where you can get some work done, where you can meet with your friends and family and see other people around you.

**Maryah Phillips:** I think home is considered your first space, and your workspace is your second space, and the third space is what you described. Thank you, Katherine. Let's talk about the stories of success of these developments. Brenda and Jesse, tell us about the successes of your development.

**Brenda Palms:** First of all, that was built. That it exists, I think is the first success. We'll go into that a little bit more later. What brings me such joy is knowing that we have a place that the community values and respects, that they do gather there, that you will see our senior citizens. You will see students from DRW College Prep. You will see professionals hanging out with their laptops and getting work done. And you will also see them experience tasting new food. There's a lot of fun talk about healthy, because we were like, "Oh, this is going to be really healthy food." And then we come to find out that people actually go out to have a little decadence. They weren't feeling the salads as much as they were the donuts and the biscuits.

So, we really had to spend some time figuring out how to make the menus work. But it was because it's community informed, and that's what makes, I think, a huge success.

Another success for us though is the reason that the North Lawndale Employment Network exists is to create jobs and to improve the earnings potential of our residents, and honestly, to become an economic driver as an anchor organization in North Lawndale. So, I will just share that there were two individuals who we hired about two years ago. They went through our U-Turn Permitted program, which is a job readiness program for individuals returning after incarceration.

We hired them in the cafe. They were wonderful. They learned a lot, and just about four months, both of them transitioned into full-time permanent jobs working at two different Starbucks. So, Starbucks has become a really important employment partner for us, and they're doing extremely well, and now they have benefits that include tuition reimbursement and so many more things that are family supporting for them. I think that's an incredible success for us as well. I can tell more, but I would also say that success is that if you build it in this particular case, people will come, but you also have to make it a place that is inviting and that is inclusive and be really intentional about that.

**Jesse Iñiguez:** Yeah. Where do you even begin? There's so many tangible and intangible moments and successes since we've opened this new space. I think the first is the most obvious is just being able to open the space in this building, this historic landmark that was blighted and abandoned for so many years, and we've brought some life into it. I think for me, that's one of the most beautiful things.

I grew up in that neighborhood. 47th and Ashland has always been our number one economic corridor, and that's a big building that immigrants and migrants from the south, when they would arrive to Back of the Yards, they would shop at the old Goldblatts building. That's where they would buy their stuff. I think someone once called it the Macy's of the working class. And yeah, even my parents and my in laws, they have stories when they bought their first coats in that building.

So, to be able to own a little piece of it, to me, that's huge, and not just own it, but essentially giving it back to the community. One of those ways that we do it is by hiring local and paying fair, sustainable wages. That's something that's super important to me. We want to make sure that people who are employed with us have meaningful, sustainable jobs living wages. So, that's one of the successes. Our manager at the shop started as a barista. She's taking the reins and she's the one training all the rest of employees and just bringing everything together.

But I think one of the successes that we were not expecting was when I first came up with this idea of a third space in Back of the Yards, I had in mind opening it up to young people in the community, because as a young person growing up there in the neighborhood, I knew that was a need for me. What I didn't anticipate was how much of a resource and a space it would be for seniors.

Every Monday now we have between 40 to 50 seniors who come in for a free coffee and a pastry. And it's beautiful because it's not just the seniors coming, they're coming with their family, they're coming with their friends. They have little cliques now. And our staff already

knows their drinks, so they have it ready before they even get to the counter, and it just become a community. What a beautiful way just to kick off a Monday morning at 9:00 AM than to see a bunch of seniors congregating, coming out of their houses and where they don't necessarily come out on a daily basis, to be able to come in the space and look forward to coming and enjoying themselves. To me, that's one of my biggest successes.

**Maryah Phillips:** I love hearing this. You all really do serve such tasty food and drinks. Take it from me. But it's also just really heartwarming to hear the stories behind how you are really serving the people beyond food and drinks. So, tell us, I know that's not the full story of what development requires. What are the challenges that come with this work?

**Brenda Palms:** Oh, gosh. Where do we begin, right? Certainly, in the case of the beelove cafe, and like Jesse, again, there's so many interesting parallels between our work. So, it's kind of cool that we're here today together, because our campus was formerly the Community Bank of North Lawndale. It was a building that had been also transitioned and abandoned for a couple of years. There had been several banks that hadn't been successful there after the original bank was established and operated for about 15 years. So, for me, it's the restoration of this beautiful building that we've been able to retain in the community as an asset.

What I will say, one of the interesting experiences I had is as a workforce development practitioner, I'm in this construction lane. I'm like, "Oh my goodness. I'm up for it." But I remember feeling a little out of sorts even though there were support around me. My architect and I, there was a day where we were interviewing general contractors. It was really apparent that the general contractors, and we interviewed about eight, and that they would sit down at the table and they would assume that my white male architect was the customer. I think, I don't know, but I certainly know they didn't think that I was the customer. So all of the contact, all the eye contact, all of the questions were never directed to me, even though I was asking the questions.

I started to understand what it feels like to be invisible and to not be heard. And at one point, during one of the interviews, my friend Larry Kearns with Wheeler Kearns & Associates, who's our architect, he literally stopped the interview and he said, "Please direct your questions and your responses to Brenda. She is the executive director of the North Lawndale Employment Network and she is your customer. "I really appreciated him being bold enough to stop the conversation and to say that because I was feeling it and I was trying to say, I am who you need to be engaged with.

As a Black woman, sometimes it's easy in this sector and construction to feel really invisible and that you have to learn how to find your voice in this process. Then of course, we did this work during COVID, so that had its own special challenges, for sure. Shipping costs, so I had all these cost overruns, and how do you value engineer, which is to get the same thing you want, but at a lower rate. So, learning so much about the industry very quickly, and happy to say that we actually opened up the campus on time. Those are some of the lessons around it.

The other is it was so important that the community felt ownership in this process. One of the things that the community wanted was this coffee shop, but I really received pushback from what's called a plan development. So, where we're located, the businesses in this planned

development all have the right to approve your business before you can be a part of this development. And believe it or not, I couldn't believe that we actually received pushback from some of the businesses in this development.

One of them was McDonald's. McDonald's was suddenly concerned that there's going to be another cafe around the block and how will that affect their business, and that's a fair question. I'm not mad at them for that. But I thought if you go north, you will see a cafe literally on every block and no one's questioning that. But why? There aren't any cafes in North Lawndale and coffee at McDonald's is not a cafe experience, right? So why the pushback?

I remember having to work really hard with our attorneys around the zoning to finally get it approved, and at the end of the day, they acquiesced the other grocery store wasn't happy about us establishing our business there either. We wanted to have farmer's markets in this beautiful lot that we have. They pushed back and said, no, because the grocery store margins are very thin to begin with. Instead of partnering with us, I thought, how do we elevate your business? I'm here to support your business. But they were like, "Nope, we can't do this."

I was surprised that something that was for the greater good of the community wasn't well received by the business community in some ways. That's changed five years later. So, now we work in better collaboration with one another, but initially that was quite surprising. And I just thought, what is driving the differences in how business operates on the West Side, South and West Sides, and how is it different on the North Side that people aren't concerned or feel threatened or competitive the competition on the North Side?

**Jesse Iñiguez:** Yeah. So for me, this whole process was a learning experience. It started during the pandemic, and we were looking for resources to survive. We had planned expansion prior to 2020, but when 2020 happened, we had to shift. We had to just look for ways to survive. I literally was looking for any and every grant out there that we would qualify for and that we could apply for.

The city actually came to us because there was this new INVEST South/West program that was happening, and they didn't come to us as someone to bid or to participate. They came to us to ask us what we think should go in the neighborhood and so that we could advise other folks to what to build there. As we're meeting with them and trying to figure out, I'm like, "Wait, we could do that. Why not us?" And they're like, "Yeah, you're not a developer." And you're right, I wasn't a developer. But then when I looked at their RFP and it's like they were seeking non-traditional developers, and that would be me.

I guess I did this, like I do everything else, not knowing what I was doing or what I was getting myself into, but figuring it out as I went. We put a team together that was amazing group of, what would be considered the non-traditional development team, architects, contractors, engineers. The companies were either women or minority owned, Black or Brown-owned, veteran-owned, LGBTQ+ owned, 100%.

So, when we bid, we were the only team that was literally 100%. Unfortunately, we weren't chosen because we were too non-traditional. The team that was chosen had a bigger, larger project that also seemed attractive, however, the community did favor our proposal and wanted to see the things that we proposed, and the older women who worked with us and the

mayor's office as well. So, we were able to put the two teams together and we're able to do our part of what we had proposed, at least part of it.

I think for me it's thanks to The Chicago Community Trust, I was able to hire a consultant, because now I'm with these pros, these experts, and I need to be at the same level with them to make sure that I'm understanding how this process works. Thanks to this consultant, I was able to learn so much. Now I feel confident to be able to do something like this on my own, something that I didn't when I entered the process. So that was difficult. Even the confidence of learning where to get the money.

I thought in my mind that many of these big developers come in, and they bring in their own money because they're rich and they're millionaires, and even if they are, I learned that none of them put in their own money. They get money from other research just the same way that I would've done myself, and there's funds there for different things, including even paying yourself, which was something that I was not anticipating. So that was a learning experience, but also even just access to capital.

I think as you mentioned, for me, also being a minority not having a wealthy background and sometimes a little bit of pride of asking for help or asking for money, but come to find out that this is the way the world works, this is the way they do it. So not being ashamed of saying we don't have the funds.

**Maryah Phillips:** You both are blazing trails in your neighborhoods, and these stories share that it's not easy work and it shows the reality of what it takes. So, thank you. Katherine, you went out into many communities of newly open developments that particularly We Rise Together has supported. Can you share just the importance of hearing from the community and what the story of impact loses without these stories?

**Katherine Faydash:** Yeah, absolutely. So, in my role in Great Cities Institute, we were conducting an evaluation, which often, as you mentioned at the beginning, is so focused on numbers. We did a mixed-methods evaluation, which means we wanted to talk to people too, essentially. So, when we went into community, our report divides things into, we looked at West, Southwest, and South Side neighborhoods. We heard a different unified story in each place, which was really exciting, especially now that we're at the end and we have all the numbers, we can go back and say, "Wow, how exciting that this reflects that so well."

On the West Side, I attended several events. One that I think was the most standout was on Juneteenth, the Aspire Center opening on Madison Street, and what I heard there from people in the community who were attending the party, essentially during the opening, was this just over and over again, hundreds of responses of people talking about joy and meaning, especially with the center opening on Juneteenth. One woman said, "This is a beacon of light for our neighborhood because it represents hope, but also because it's a new, beautiful building that's lit up at night and kind of contributes to the skyline in that way." So, that was the story I was hearing a lot on the West Side, not just there, but in several other sites I visited too.

On the Southwest Side, lots of things about saying, "We know who we are, and we are so excited to have this neighborhood identity that we have. So, now we feel seen like we can show

it off. We are rich in community. We are natural entrepreneurs. We want the space to do these things that this project represents in different ways." And that was businesses and also a mural opening in Gage Park, for example. In Back of the Yards, I heard a lot of people saying things like, "Nobody ever thinks about farms in Back of the Yards. We're so good at it, or we have so many different connections in different ways." So that was really exciting, like the network of Southwest Side stories.

And on the South Side we heard a lot. The sites I visited there were different. They were focused on, one was the workforce, and I heard a lot of great stories there about people just in the same way saying, "I'm surprised this is for me in my neighborhood. And here I am in this one instance having a chance to change my career at a time that is important for me, either because I have a family now or because I wasn't doing something I loved and I want that opportunity." So, it was interesting the themes that we heard across all of the different neighborhoods.

**Brenda Palms:** I just want to echo that this is for me, while Jesse and I were nodding when you said that, because the truth of the matter is I've heard that too, a lot in the cafe. I remember when we first opened up, there was a woman who was standing outside the sidewalk looking into the cafe and it was like she was curious, but she didn't feel like, "Can I come in?" And too many times residents don't feel like certain spaces are for them.

I grabbed one of the baristas and we went outside and said, "Hi, this is a place for you." And she came in, we treated her with some coffee. And she was so amazed and she was like, "Are you the owner?" I'm like, "Technically no, because it's a nonprofit. But yeah, I am responsible for having this in this space." And she was like, "Wow." The color of my skin, who I am. And the fact that we are having ownership in the neighborhood meant so much. And I'll be honest; I hear that so many times. It's so inspiring for people to see what's possible and that it can happen in my neighborhood and that I'm experiencing it personally. It's not happening over there, but with me.

**Jesse Iñiguez:** Same. I think I've heard a few times when we first opened up, this space looks like it belongs in the North Side. And I said, "No, it belongs here." Our community deserves to have nice things too, and then the fact that I'm from that community and people know me, they know that I grew up there and I'm someone like them. They see that's something they can aspire to do. Someone that looks like them, that grew up like them can also do something special. So, I think for me, I'm glad that you said that because that's the same experience we've had as well.

**Maryah Phillips:** Which is why I consider you both just trailblazers. I really do see you both as that. And hopefully, as we continue to see more non-traditional developers in this space, we can erase the non-traditional part and see that community is developing in their areas, and owning the spaces too.

**Brenda Palms:** With The Chicago Community Trust honestly and We Rise Together, I hope that you all are pausing to say, look at what's being seated and look how neighborhoods are being

transformed with the access to capital that we've talked about. But beyond that, there's all this technical assistance. When I needed to have a shoulder to cry on, Christen was there for me. When I needed someone to remind me of my worth and my value, I received that kind of support from We Rise Together. So, I think it's just extraordinary to know that our neighborhoods have been fundamentally transformed over the last five years.

You think about 2020, when we were building this work and we were starting this work, and now you drive around and you start to see all this new construction and you see it happening in neighborhoods like ours, there's something that just kind of makes you stand a little taller and a little pride and people respond. They will say, "Thank you so much for showing us what's possible."

I'll take some credit, right? We were pioneering in it, but I'm so very proud of what's happening in our neighborhoods and that access to capital and the kind of technical assistance and support is there. That you actually have the Mastercard study that further validates our work. So, I don't have to say, "Here's what my data says." That you actually have MastecCard and UI who can tell the story, amplify it, give it the data that it needs because sometimes people still don't want to believe our stories, right?

**Maryah Phillips:** Thank you, Brenda. I love it. Okay. So, this last question is just around what's coming to your neighborhood. What's next? Let us know we're excited to hear what's in the work.

**Jesse Iñiguez:** Yeah, so we're growing, we're expanding. That's one of the exciting things that we're doing now. We're opening up a second location in Pilsen. We've been planning this for quite some time, but again, we took a pause because of the pandemic and I have some exciting partnerships. We're also growing internationally in Mexico as well, and just being able to put the name of Back of the Yards, a community that I love, but that oftentimes is attached to negative things. To be able to put the name out there with pride and now people associated with coffee and something positive, to me that's just a great thing to be able to do. So, I'm excited about that.

**Brenda Palms:** Yeah. Changing that narrative. It is so powerful, so important. Lots of fun things happening in North Lawndale as well. One of the things that this campus has allowed us to do is to expand our production space for Sweet Beginnings. So, our beelove products are definitely expanding. We have strengthened our distribution and broadened our distribution at O'Hare Airport and Midway through our partnership, our distribution partner with Hudson's. So, we just produced our new honey packets. In addition to Hudson's broadening their distribution because now our lip balms are all as a point of sale at 20 of the stores now at O'Hare. So that's creating more jobs, right? But that's cool. But then they approach Starbucks. There are 16 Starbucks at O'Hare, and of the 16, we have 10 that have committed to distributing our Beelove honey at their Starbucks stores. So that's so cool. They should be associated with a social purpose product, and something that's local that helps to expand and tell their story because they can use some help. We can all use some help.

Then the other piece that's really exciting is there's another project that I believe the Trust and many others are supporting, and that's the Sankofa Wellness Center. They have invited us to be their cafe of choice. So we're looking at, get ready, pollinating the model of our beelove cafe at that Garfield Sankofa Wellness Center. And we're excited about that expansion as well.

**Maryah Phillips:** Did you want to share a little bit about the Pollinator Pavilion?

**Brenda Palms:** Oh, goodness gracious. So, we recently received support for an expansion of our Sweet Beginnings social enterprise movement, and that is to establish the Sweet Beginnings Pollinating Pavilion, which is taking a vacant lot, a couple of vacant lots directly across the street from our beelove cafe and transforming it into this space. There are bees, of course, but it's going to be educational. We see this being beekeeping bootcamp where people can learn about the power and the importance of pollinators, and creating jobs again on top of that and becoming an ecotourism destination in North Lawndale. Come to North Lawndale and experience the coffee, of course, but then come across the street and learn about the power of pollination in our food and ecosystem.

**Maryah Phillips:** And Katherine, I know you're hearing a lot from residents on the South and Southwest Side and the West Sides saying what they want to see happen in these communities next. What are you hearing?

**Katherine Faydash:** Yeah, absolutely. One of the things I heard a lot about was I think the best way to describe it is less friction. People want it to be easier to move around, to get around, to get to the third spaces they want to go to in their neighborhood, and I think to express themselves. I heard in a lot of contexts I was visiting where art was a piece of this. People were saying, "We want more of this. We want this for our youth." And so the less friction is one part. And the other part is that everybody I talked to throughout this evaluation said, "We would like more of this please. The Chicago Community Trust, We Rise Together, please keep this going." And for all of the reasons I mentioned before, people saying that they feel seen for the first time, or they have their own ideas, or they're working with people in their neighborhood. And so that was really exciting to hear.

**Maryah Phillips:** I know you have a story in particular. I'd love to hear you just share about the woman in her writing.

**Katherine Faydash:** Absolutely. I visited the North Lawndale Employment Network, and I was so excited to be invited to go there. It's a little strange to say, "Hey, I'm an evaluator. I work at a university. Can I just come talk to you about some stuff?" So, everybody was so welcoming. And it was the first day, I believe, or possibly the second day of, I think it was the U-Turn Permitted program, and we had lunch then, so everybody sat down. I was there with a little microphone talking with people, and amazing stories. So many amazing stories that people were sharing just there with the business ideas and hearing what's next from people and what their neighborhood was like and how they see it now.

And in all of this, I had asked people, because of course we're still after data, to fill out a little form at the end and just to share if there was anything else they didn't want to share publicly. And one of the questions was, "What are you looking forward to most?" And just leaving it open-ended. One woman who had shared, everybody shared throughout the lunch but had seemed shy and reserved and maybe wasn't ready yet to share everything in our very vibrant conversation. She wrote in huge, beautiful letters, life, and dotted the "i" with a star. I just got goosebumps. Every time I think of it, I just felt so much joy for her, and she was so excited and so there and present. I feel lucky getting to go visit all of these sites. There's so much hope there and that's what we've walked away with.

**Brenda Palms:** It's really interesting. The power of data can be a standalone, but it's the stories of impact and the personal stories that give that data life. When she talked about what are you looking forward to, it just tells you how much she hasn't felt she's lived life, but that she is optimistic and that she is hopeful because of what's happening in community.

**Maryah Phillips:** You said it Brenda. Thank you. Yeah, life. Life. These spaces are breathing life into these neighborhoods. And the spaces themselves I feel are like living and breathing in itself and growing and influencing growth in the neighborhoods. Thank you all for sharing your stories behind these numbers that can sometimes limit what's really happening in these communities.

What's happening in these communities cannot nearly be captured or limited to data and statistics. There is something happening that is way beyond data, and it is felt rather than evaluated. We are seeing, hearing and feeling the momentum driving more and more opportunity and growth while also witnessing increased community pride and safety around areas that have been historically disinvested in. These stories are why we are continuing to support neighborhood anchors like Back of the Yards Coffee House of the United Yards Development and North Lawndale Employment Network through the Neighborhood Capital Fund. We can't quit now.

Thank you all for your time, thank you for sharing and thank you for this wonderful conversation that helps us dig into the stories behind what this work really takes.