

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

Peter Sobota [00:00:06] And so where do you develop the skill set to implement and execute the goals and initiatives of an organization that has 27 youth sites, serves over 20,000 children in the nation's largest city, and a budget of 30 million. Well, don't you know how about an MSW from Syracuse University, for starters? Hi, everybody. Welcome to In Social Work from the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, I'm Peter Sobota. Good as always, to have you off. Sure, you can power away your MSW into a clinical role in any number of human service organizations or agency settings. And there's nothing wrong with that. Or you can follow the path of our guest, Carlos Velasquez, the executive director of the Police Athletic League of New York City, the largest independent youth development, not for profit in New York City. Wondering how to apply your social work skill set to larger systems and make a living. This is an inspiring first person account from a dynamic leader who will tell you how he got into the room where it happened. Mr. Velasquez will share his personal and professional journey that runs through growing up with strong roots in East Harlem, the social work profession, the working at the macro level, and two leadership positions in New York City's largest organizations serving the needs of underserved youth. He uses his skill set firmly rooted in the core values social work to nurture strategic relationships with community partners and government agencies. Carlos Velasquez, MSW, is the executive director of the New York City Police Athletic League. Previously, he was the chief operating officer of the Boys Club of New York City and throughout his career has collaborated with partners in education, law enforcement and the social justice system. Carlos Velasquez, welcome to In Social Work. It's great to have you.

Carlos Velazquez [00:02:20] Great to be here, Peter. Thank you.

Peter Sobota [00:02:22] You know, when we spoke in the summer, there was a really good chance that you as a mets fan and I as a Yankees fan, we might be playing each other now. Now we're recording this somewhat. The first couple of days of November, the World Series is going on. So back then, there was the potential of the Mets playing the Yankees in the World Series. And this could have been an incredibly awkward conversation. But fortunately, both the Mets and the Yankees flamed out. And we can get through this as colleagues and cordially. Does that seem right to you?

Carlos Velazquez [00:02:59] That seems about right. I mean, we will celebrate in their demise.

Peter Sobota [00:03:04] Oh. Oh, that was painful. Let's get on with our with our discussion. It's great to see you. As I mentioned in the intro, you are the executive director of the Police Athletic League of New York City. Do I have that right?

Carlos Velazquez [00:03:20] You're absolutely correct.

Peter Sobota [00:03:22] So I was talking to my class the other day and we were talking about different options that social workers could follow in their careers other than kind of going to an agency and working, you know, doing direct service. And I mentioned you and your work with the Police Athletic League, and almost everyone in my class didn't know what the police thought.

Carlos Velazquez [00:03:46] That's a bit sad here, but it's something that, you know, a lot of people, it's split in half. There's there's people, pal. Police Athletic League that played a sport when I was a kid. I box. I played in their basketball leagues and they're little leagues.

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

And there are people like, so you run programs for officers and you create sporting leagues for them. So yeah, so it's a mix between how familiar people are. But the Police Athletic League was an organization started in 1914 in New York City by Commissioner Arthur Woods at the time, and he closed down some streets on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1940 where he took young people and gave them a safe space to play, but also wanted to connect them with law enforcement. So that is the foundation of the Police Athletic League, making sure young people are safe, making sure they have a connection with law enforcement. But over the years has evolved to an amazing organization in New York City and across the country. But in New York City particularly, we have 27 sites across all five boroughs of New York City we serve. 15,000 young people. But everything from Head Start all the way through. College access. College success. Services. STEM programming. And we do that still in partnership with the New York Police Department and Law Enforcement. But we're a completely independent nonprofit.

Peter Sobota [00:05:23] So this may seem a thank you, by the way. This may seem like a silly question, but it sounds like you're giving young people an alternative and you're you're kind of providing structure. And and obviously, there's lots of great reasons to get involved in athletics and sports. But why the police? Why do we need. Why are the police in this mix?

Carlos Velazquez [00:05:44] I think the reason has evolved over time. And I'll talk about now for me why it's so important is is one we know that there there are a lot of issues between communities and with law enforcement. We know that law enforcement is important in terms of safety in our communities. And that relationship between your everyday citizen, your young person and law enforcement is very important. And I think that was the genesis of why the Police Athletic League was started. But today it's more important. One, we want to bridge that gap, but also we want to serve as a voice to work in our communities when things are not going right with law enforcement. So it's not just about us collaborating and working together to provide opportunities or alternatives for young people, but also to serve as a voice for our young people when they're having issues with law enforcement, when they don't feel safe in their community. Mm hmm. They weren't connected at all.

Peter Sobota [00:06:50] So if I could and if I ask naive questions, bear with me, because I think, you know, I'm really not an expert at this at all. What is the difference between, for example, community based policing and what the Police Athletic League does?

Carlos Velazquez [00:07:07] I think community based police thing is more about. Law enforcement still doing their job as police officers and keeping law and order in communities and building that connection with community partners and with community residents. What Police Athletic League does is we're not policing. We're not law enforcement. We're providing an opportunity for young people in our families to be safe and for our young people to have a space to grow and and explore. But we're not enforcing laws. We're not trying to keep law and order, per se, in our communities. And community policing is more about connecting with the community, but also creating that law and order atmosphere.

Peter Sobota [00:08:02] Obviously I hear and see the difference between the two, but there are similarities. I also hear in what the intent is behind both set fare.

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

Carlos Velazquez [00:08:13] I think that's very fair. In terms of just building of community and building of relationships. And we see it work in New York City and we see it work at the Police Athletic League, where we have officers who come into our space weekly and connect with young people and connect in a way which is very informal, where they they walk in and they'll sit down and have a snack or just talk to our young people will also in a more formal way where we have officers who come in every Saturday night and work out with our students in our Saturday Night Lights basketball program. That's in collaboration with law enforcement in New York City. So we provide. Low stress, informal ways to connect, but also more formal ways where we think it's important for our young people to build relationships and also work for officers in those neighborhoods to build relationships. And I think sometimes we always talk about how young people need to connect with law enforcement and with police. But we we skipped the step of. The opposite, where it's important for our officers to be able to come in and see young people in a different element, see young people where they might not have such a barrier of walking in the streets or just their everyday life in the city.

Peter Sobota [00:09:37] Yeah. Is it accurate to I don't want to make this assumption, but is it accurate to say that in New York that the primarily the people you're serving are people of color?

Carlos Velazquez [00:09:51] It's fair to say yes. Okay. Fair to say we look to have our programs and communities where there is a need. And there in many of those communities in New York City, they're predominantly people of color African-American, Latino, Asian. But we we serve and we don't discriminate against any race or gender or or religion. So a police athletic league is made up of a number of different people, very synonymous to New York City. It's definitely still the beautiful mosaic that makes up the city. Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:10:27] I can't imagine why young people of color would need to. Would need a mechanism to interact in a safe and positive way with law enforcement.

Carlos Velazquez [00:10:39] And I understand what you're saying. But, you know, I think the goal is was never in my mind to make sure that young people of color connect with law enforcement. Just the young people of New York City. Right. We have we have young people who come from all walks of life. Their families come from all walks of life there. You have the young people who their families are well-to-do and you have families that are struggling. But it's that connection of just being New Yorkers, that connection of just building relationships and networking with each other. That makes the organization special. And as much as we say Police Athletic League and we talk about police in our name, it is not the end all, be all. And not every single program is connected with the police department. And also, depending on the neighborhood and depending on what's going on at that time, and the relationship might be a lot stronger than others.

Peter Sobota [00:11:38] Yes. And you said earlier, did you say that you have 22 sites?

Carlos Velazquez [00:11:43] We have 27 sites.

Peter Sobota [00:11:44] 27 sites. Are they mostly in Manhattan?

Carlos Velazquez [00:11:48] No, they're spread out throughout the five boroughs.

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

Peter Sobota [00:11:50] Throughout the boroughs.

Carlos Velazquez [00:11:52] Yes. So we have community centers, we have school based sites and we have eight head starts.

Peter Sobota [00:11:58] You know, I am again, I'm not an expert on Powell, but I do remember reading years ago that there was criticism of police athletic league programs because kind of socializing people, young people to be kind of. Deferential to law enforcement and to just be controlled in a nicer way. And also that it didn't go far enough. But it sounds like and I didn't know this that you have or you're running a human service agency, almost a non-for-profit that is way beyond sports leagues and activities.

Carlos Velazquez [00:12:38] That is correct, Peter. The the Police Athletic League in its foundation was the connection between law enforcement and young people and focused on play in athletics. But it's evolved beyond what I think anybody could have imagined with this athletic league being and very different than many of the police athletic leagues across the country where it is a social service agency. It's an organization with social workers, with mental health counselors, with therapists, with adults, with specialties in the STEM fields and college access and high school access. It is a place where a young person can come and not necessarily be just exposed, but can explore opportunity, be on athletic. There are a number of kids never pick up a basketball, right. You know, go into the gym, but you'll see them in the computer lab or you see them in a performing arts program. So it's an opportunity for young people to be safe. You know, the the old school safe haven of a community center. Right. For a young person to grow and explore opportunities that they might not have in their community or in their schools.

Peter Sobota [00:13:53] Mm hmm. To kind of bring them in, engage them. There's the relationship aspect. And then you tailor the needs to the community.

Carlos Velazquez [00:14:04] Pretty head on. Oh, okay. Okay. It's pretty rare. And the other thing that I failed to mention is that the resource that we serve to the community as a whole, but also to the families and to the parents. So. Kara. Yeah. Yeah. Parent workshops. Some of our sites have food pantries and some of our sites do clothing drives. We have Christmas giveaways or holiday giveaways. So, you know, it's it's very normal for a parent to walk in and just say, I'm having trouble with my my child's school and I need someone to help me advocate for whether it's an IEP or whether it's something around safety. So we really work on being that resource for not just the young people, but the community as a whole.

Peter Sobota [00:14:54] Wow. Wow. All right. All right. Well, thank you for the Police Athletic League 101. I think that's going to help a lot of people and it helped me. So now what I'm really curious about is. I wondered if we could if it's all right with you. I want to talk a little bit about you, the person, the professional, the social worker, and then I'll probably circle back to how that plays out at the Police Athletic League. So one of the things that I talk to students at our school here in Buffalo is, and I'm sure you're aware of this, is that many, many folks come to MSW programs and primarily they're interested in clinical work and counseling services. And sure, there's a place for that. What I always find myself doing is is kind of. Almost like getting on a soapbox in that the skillset of a social worker is just so varied beyond that. And of course, a lot of us who work in the field understand very quickly at the micro level that you could be doing this forever unless you make interventions in the environment at the macro level. So it's just so exciting that you're a social worker and and you're running this gigantic agency. So I'm curious, like, how did this

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

happen? How did you get me? I'll give you a bunch of questions. You pick the one you want. How did you come to social work? I'm curious. Were you always focused at the macro level? And then please tell us how you ended up becoming the executive director of the New York Police Athletic League. And remember, this is a 45 to 50 minute show, Carlos, so you got to get in there.

Carlos Velazquez [00:16:47] I'll give you the cliff notes. All right. So, Peter. So sure. I would say found me. It wasn't something that I was thinking of. I remember going to high school, went to all boys Catholic High School on the Lower East side of New York City. And, you know, my parents were okay with sending you or paying tuition. You're going to be a doctor. You're going to be a lawyer, but you're not going to become as a teacher and you're not going to become a teacher. And social work was not even in the realm of what they had hoped for me. And during my time in high school, I spent my time in a lot of activities, but really found myself as trying to be supportive of all of my classmates. It was a small school, and I remember being a peer leader, you know, being an assistant and freshman homeroom. So when I think back, I was already trying to be helpful, trying to help people who might need a resource. And as I progress and I got to my senior year, I applied to Syracuse University and I actually applied for their arts and science school to major in political science. So I was like, I'm going to be a lawyer. I like to argue, defend people, but this is what I'm going to do at my guidance counselor at the time was like, Well, you got to pick a second choice. I think you should pick social work. You're helpful. It's a great way to get into Syracuse. They have a great program. And, you know, we'll see what happens. So I was accepted into the school of social work at Syracuse. My my first choice was going to Syracuse University. So in my mind, I was like, wow, go nice. I'll get into social work school. And then after a couple of semesters, I'll get into the policy program and become a lawyer like I was right. And I remember my introduction to social work class with the dean. At the time, Dean Frederick Pollard was the dean of the School of Social Work. And just talking about, you know, the the career and the life of a social worker and how you can impact change and support people. And he sold me and I was like, you know what? This is something interesting. I'm going to figure out what I want to do through this. And it really just took off in terms of the work I was doing in class, my field placement in a local school. Amazing professors like Dr. Alford, who you know well, who they fool for listeners.

Peter Sobota [00:19:34] That's our dean here in Buffalo, Keith Alford. Yeah.

Carlos Velazquez [00:19:38] And just really kind of fell in love with the concept of really being able to impact change, but still didn't figure out how I would take my, my life as a social worker to do it. And at the same time being very worried about, you know, what you get taught as a student in social work and what your friends are telling you is like, how are you ever going to make some money just helping people. All right.

Peter Sobota [00:20:06] So those that.

Carlos Velazquez [00:20:08] It's a little voice on this this side of your shoulder where you're just trying to figure it out. So fast forward. Finished undergrad. My first job out of college is working for a for service social service organization that data assessments or people on. On public assistance. And just being in there was like, this is not what I want to do. I don't want to work with an individual every day. I don't want to, you know, see people struggle in this way and not really be able to provide support. But what stuck out to me, what the young people who were coming to translate for their parents or it's or to be able just to be a voice for their parents because whatever their parents had going on. And I was

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

like, well, to really make change, I need to go back and get a masters because I need to up my skill set. I need to figure out how people will take me more seriously. And I think people would take me seriously as a caseworker in social work. I went back to Syracuse and their master's program, but I focused on community organizing, policy and administration, right? So now this is perfect. I'm merging this side of my brain that wanted to get into political science and get law policy administration. The big words I put the community organizing piece. Fast forward through my my masters got a job as a social worker in an after school program. And that's when it hit. That's when it was this opportunity to provide a resource for a young person, to provide resources for a community outside a school setting, outside of a setting where people are being labeled as needing specific help for a specific need. Now, this is impact, right? You take all different types of people and you bring them together, create community, and you create change. And that's the work that I've kind of or not kind of that's the work I've committed myself to. Yeah. And just understanding what are the issues going on in different communities and how to affect change, just not on the ground level with the everyday work with the individual, but when it comes to on a larger scale and how do you have your impact impact others to help you make that change? So that is where, you know, this part of being administrator and executive director, someone who connects the dots, really started taking shape for me.

Peter Sobota [00:22:53] Yeah. And I would imagine or well, I'll let you weigh in on this, but I would imagine some of those early lessons on the benefit of social capital have probably come in pretty handy.

Carlos Velazquez [00:23:05] Definitely. I think, you know, one of the things I always tell people, it's about, you know, your life journey is your your biggest educator. Right? It's it's what you've learned, what you've seen that's really shaping how you make decisions. And I think as a good social worker, that's what makes us great. Right? It's the ability to work with so many different people. But look at any person as the same as the person before, but take the different things you've learned. And I think that is the same thing in terms of my life journey with this work is being able to look at different environments, looking at different issues and and using that as a way to kind of connect the dots.

Peter Sobota [00:23:51] Yeah. Interesting. Well, thank you. Now, wait a minute. I think I'm giving you short shrift here. You also have a master's degree. Don't you also have a master's degree in education? Yes.

Carlos Velazquez [00:24:05] So while I was working at my first job as a social worker in a after school program, what started dawning on me was I need to learn more about education in the school system, because it seemed like education was really impacting, for better or worse, the communities that I decided to work in. So there's there's a school in New York City, the Bank Street School of Education, amazing institution that had a master's in education focused on community based leadership that was like, Oh, they need a program for me. Yeah. So I it wasn't far from, from where I was working. So I applied and it was one of the best decisions I made because they were really able to take full circle the, my focus on young people, my focus on community, my focus on leadership, but taking my skills as a social worker. So look at kind of macro issues on a very. Micro level on how. How individuals impact systems really, I think, helped me become a seasoned professional in this field.

Peter Sobota [00:25:23] Yeah, that is a great way of kind of giving voice to that kind of false separation between macro and micro is is exactly that. It's not it's not accurate.

[Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez](#)

Wonderful. Now, I you know, I guess I can't deny the reality. I know that you were born in in East Harlem. Do I have that right?

Carlos Velazquez [00:25:49] Yes.

Peter Sobota [00:25:50] Okay. So and your folks sent you down to the East Village for school, it sounds like. But what I'm curious about and yeah, I guess know, can we just be can we just be really honest and say that social work is an incredibly white profession? Can we just.

Carlos Velazquez [00:26:10] Yes, we can own that, Peter.

Peter Sobota [00:26:12] We can say that out loud. Right. So I think you're a native of Spanish Harlem. I was Spanish Harlem. I don't know. When does it become East Harlem?

Carlos Velazquez [00:26:22] It is bad as hollow folk, but many people confuse it. So I say East Harlem for those who don't understand but is Spanish Harlem El Barrio as a native New York is calling.

Peter Sobota [00:26:35] The neighborhood.

Carlos Velazquez [00:26:36] Its amazing neighborhood with culture, history and just some of the most amazing people you will meet.

Peter Sobota [00:26:44] So, you know, and I haven't been there in probably 15 or 20 years, and I know that it's getting a bit gentrified is what I hear from some of the people who I know. But so here is my thing. Now, how cool is it that a native of Spanish Harlem, a person of color? Rises up through his profession and his life to become the executive director of this broad, expansive organization that touches the lives of a zillion people. I'm curious to what extent, if at all. Does your experience growing up in East Harlem inform how you lead your organization?

Carlos Velazquez [00:27:31] I think my being raised in Spanish Harlem has everything to do with who I am today. And I say that because one is when I was growing up in that neighborhood, it was very much the village that we talk about that it takes to train good young people. And I can remember everyone in my building knowing who I was, everybody in the neighborhood, knowing who my parents were, and the ability to feel safe, to feel empowered by knowing that there were carrying adults around. That went away because you also had to realize all the dangers that were around you growing up in that neighborhood. We couldn't let that get in the way. There was never a day where my parents allowed me to be afraid of what was outside the door. It was learning to navigate, learning to adapt, learning to overcome, and the ability to not be afraid about what you were going to encounter, the ability to have to understand what you were going to encounter and then to overcome it or work through it is everything that I do every single day. It's every time I wake up, I need to understand where I'm headed in terms of work. Sometimes neighborhoods, sometimes who I will be meeting with and understand what is it that I need from them? What is it that I need to? Be aware of and then the ability to overcome it to reach my goals as the executive director of the Police Athletic League. But just in general, to make sure that I am serving as a voice, I am serving as a leader for communities and young people who don't have that opportunity.

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

Peter Sobota [00:29:35] Thanks. You know, I'm also curious, given the kind of the village and the microcosm of that community. And it sounds like what it gave you by being a member of it and contributing to it, you know, to what degree did your formal education enhance that or was there a disconnect? I guess we can't ignore the fact that sometimes, you know, our educational systems are the product of our broader society. That is not always, let's say, sensitive to the needs of people of color and other people who are marginalized by it.

Carlos Velazquez [00:30:15] I think that's a that's a great question. And I think, you know, my life path was a little different where my my parents decided that I would be going to parochial school from first grade all the way through high school. Because of that, because of they recognized that there were things that I would not be able to learn or experience by going to a traditional public school in New York City. Mm hmm. Going away to college, going to Syracuse University. Very different from that is what was I was able to learn me and encounter people from all around the world that was able to widen my my horizon of what the world was. When I when I think of that education piece, though, it depends what you mean by education. Yeah. I used to do a lot of college access work and college success work and I said, you know, between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., that school. You've done school for 12 years before you've gone to college and there'll be some things you encounter. Written up people paper before you taken it says, I had an issue with a teacher. You know, you've dealt with that. It's what happens after 3:00 into 6:59 in the morning. That is where the real education kicks in. Right. The social issue. The being able to try different things, being able to connect with people you would have never connected for. And I think that part of my education is the part that. Is that the most special for me, but also the most impactful for me?

Peter Sobota [00:32:04] Yeah. Thank you. Thanks for taking that one on. So now could we swing back from there to your current position? And I don't know how this is going to sound, but I want to be really practical. So I don't know what other way to say it. What exactly do you do day to day in your job? What do you spend your time doing as an executive director?

Carlos Velazquez [00:32:35] What I spent my time as executive director doing is. There's there's a number of facets. One of the the most important part is raising money. Police Athletic League is a \$32 million a year organization, and every year we have to raise those dollars to provide those and parts and programs to young people. So it is meeting with donors is soliciting funds from organizations, corporations, foundations. It is reviewing grant proposals. That is a major part of of who we are or what I do. The second part of it is acting as an ambassador of the organization to other organizations and figuring out ways to collaborate, figuring out ways to partner with city agencies, with other individuals to enhance the work that we're doing. The next part of it is just overseeing not the day to day work, but the culture of the organization and in terms of making sure it is a safe space for young people. It's a place where people want to work, but it's a place that has integrity and is ethical. And you think of a social worker. A lot of what you're doing is finding resources, right? For for families or for individuals. You're acting as an advocate for individuals and you're making sure that you're treating people ethically, that they're safe and you're giving them a chance. So if you think about it, what I do every day as an executive director is I put my social work hat on on a macro level, and I get to work and take the skills I've learned working with individuals and taking that to just a bigger scale.

Peter Sobota [00:34:33] Yeah, and it's thanks so much for that because I you know, I was talking about the clinical role earlier and and the attraction for for many kind of up and

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

coming social workers to that role. But exactly what you just said, those other roles, it's like being an enabler, a an educator, an advocate, a mediator. An educator. And I'm sure a collaborator and networker of the highest level. And interestingly enough is that even when you're doing fundraising, which I think a lot of people find difficult or not, you know, it's not the favorite part of their job. But it sounds like no matter what role you are in, similar to a clinical role you are using. That container and expertise around the art of relationship about connecting with people, connecting them with each other with, I would assume, community partners, funders, government agencies. It's it all still comes down to relationship, doesn't it?

Carlos Velazquez [00:35:46] Peter, you're absolutely correct. And I think something also as a leader, I try to model because I want it to trickle down. One of the things that I think has helped me the most in my career and in my life is the ability to network and build relationships and build trust. And I think at the highest level, if I embody that, that trickles down to my staff and eventually gets down to our young people. And and it's one of the things where if you don't have that skill set or if you're not good at that skill set, I won't say great. Just even good at that skill set. It can truly impact the results for a community or for an organization.

Peter Sobota [00:36:34] All right. So I have to admit, more and more of the students who are least coming into our programs here is at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. What is really encouraging is that many of them are coming in already interested in the big picture at the at the macro level. And you've talked a little bit about this along the way, but I want to give you one more shot. If you if you if you want to say more now that we know a little bit about your personal story as well. What kind of advice would you give to students who are drawn to macro work? But simply wondering how they're going to make a living doing it.

Carlos Velazquez [00:37:20] I think the first thing is, like in any other industry, you have to learn the business, you have to learn the game and you have to start somewhere. You are not going to graduate from a master's program in social work and become an executive director after graduate. Unless you are going to become the executive director of your own organization. You have to put in the time. You have to put in the work. You have to find your passion. And for some people, that passion might be young people. It might be adults. It might be people dealing with substance abuse. It's trying to figure out what is your passion and or niche. Because to be honest with you. Being an executive director of a nonprofit social service agency. If you're not in it with a passion for those you serve, the work is so grueling, it's intense. It is a time suck in terms of just the ability to balance that you will burn out quicker than if you were doing clinical work at the highest level. So you have to put in that time just learning the different paths and understanding the business of the work. I'll tell you a quick story, Peter.

Peter Sobota [00:38:42] Please.

Carlos Velazquez [00:38:43] When I first started this work as a social work at a nonprofit in Spanish Harlem. I started running that college access program, and there was a young lady who her dad did not want her to go away to college, didn't even think he wanted her to go to college. And we convince the dad. We talked to her, we were able to get her a full ride to Northeastern University and game changing. And I work for her. I follow her on Instagram and she's doing amazing things. And I remember a few months after that we were having a meeting, one of the major funders in New York City, and they invited me in to talk about the story. And I was like, I'm going to tell you about this young lady. I told

Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez

them the story. I was so excited. And the program officer who makes a decision on who gets the funding asked me, Well, how much did it cost to do that? And I said, How much did it cost? I was like, Wait, let me tell you the story again. She was not going to go to college. Her fairy parents did not have money. This could have turned out really bad for her. Well, how how much did it cost and how much would it cost to do that with ten kids? And, you know, what is the cost per student as a cost per student? And at that moment, I realized that there's a business behind it, whether we like it or we don't like it. And and becoming an executive director. Now, I understand why I was asked that question. And those are some of the same questions I ask now. So my staff, what's the cost per student? How can we replicate this? Yeah, but you get a gut check when you realize that if you want to do this work, there are going to be some things that aren't so aligned with what we think of the social work profession and now all in and saving that one young person or saving that one individual. So, you know, I think learning the business, learning what your passion is, but understanding that it is a business and you have to be strong financially, you have to be strong when it comes to communicating in your writing and all these skills that sometimes, you know, some people feel as a social worker just has to be able to connect with people and make them feel good about themselves and, you know, make sure that they come back to the next session. There's a lot more that goes into that macro level that you have to be prepared for. And it's a journey. It's I've been doing this work. I would say, in the nonprofit setting since 2007. So it's taken me 15 years for my first director position. Mm hmm. It's work and you have to be able to kind of. Go along for the ride and the ups and downs that comes with it.

Peter Sobota [00:41:45] Yeah. Thanks. So. It's just such a great story, honestly. It's a great story because I think my lessons learned and back in my practitioner days and doing some not the level of administrative work that you're doing, but on a much smaller scale, you quickly learn that if you are going to be out there looking for resources and funding, that, you know, people don't call you up and out if they want some money. When it comes time to to get funded or to get resources, you need to shift your thinking to what's the cost and how can you articulate that? Because that's what, you know, cooks the rice essentially for for people who are handing over the money. And also they want. Data. They want. They want. They want to show. They want to be shown that in many cases that their money is going to places and it's doing something. And for a lot of social workers, you're right. MSW programs, I would add, I don't know if I can make a broad based approach or a sweeping statement like this, but we're probably not that great at building practitioners who are savvy. Unless they choose those courses.

Carlos Velazquez [00:43:10] I agree with you, Peter. No, this this whole concept of return on investment in. And so what does that mean? And, you know, another part of what I do is trying to convince people that they are investing in a community. They're not giving to a charity. Right. Because when you get this a charity, drop a dollar and the, you know, a bucket and you hope it goes well when you are investing in a community, you want to see what comes out of it. And that is something that, you know, you have to understand getting into this work.

Peter Sobota [00:43:44] Yeah. Thanks. So we're getting kind of toward the end of our at least our plan time together. But I you know, while you were talking, I really had a thought that I would like to ask you. And that you can do with it as you would want to or really not. But the other thing that I don't think it's it's really reasonable to deny is that. Currently we are living through a period, an era or whatever of. Really difficult social and political upheaval. And we have. You know, kind of the mainstreaming of white supremacy, this kind of vilification of immigrants issues even related to tension between people and law

[Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez](#)

enforcement. I'm just wondering. I mean, the work is hard enough. But when you're trying to do your work in the context of all of that, does is what's happening in the broader society. Is that impacting the way you lead and the functioning of your organization?

Carlos Velazquez [00:45:04] That's a great question, Peter.

Peter Sobota [00:45:05] It's a pretty vague one, but you probably know what I'm talking about.

Carlos Velazquez [00:45:09] Definitely. I think, you know, for me, I'm living through it. We're all living through it day to day. Right. So I think in 2022, you have to put a lot more thought about how you live your life and what you say, what you do with who you do it with. And it's it's very similar in to when you think of being an executive director that there is an impact on who we partner with. There is an impact on how people even feel about our organization because we have police in our name. There's people who love the Police Athletic League because it's police, and there's people who want nothing to do with it because it has police in the name. No matter how compelling this story is, and I think that it is important for me day to day to to ask those questions how how am I keeping the integrity of the work, the integrity of the communities that I serve? By connecting. Partnering. By. Teaching. By promoting anything in the work, you have to be more mindful of it then I think you did ten years ago, you know, even five years ago. I think one thing about the pandemic that's impacted all of us, we pay a lot more attention to things because we had a lot more time to pay attention to things. Right. So so we felt we we've taken this two years away, you say from the world where all we did was pay attention to the things in front of us on a screen. And I think that that translated to the world we live in. People are paying a lot more attention.

Peter Sobota [00:46:58] First of all, thank you so much for telling us about your work and and what you're trying to do. And also very much thank you for sharing your personal story in terms of who you are and as you are as a social worker. It really is, you know, frankly, quite inspiring. I want to give you an opportunity if you want to take it, too, to speak to anything that maybe you you wanted to talk about or wanted to add. But I didn't ask you about.

Carlos Velazquez [00:47:29] I think one of the things that I would love to stress to to those listeners, especially those master's students, or even if you're at your undergrad trying to get into the field, is that your story is important and don't lose your story while you're doing your work. It is important no matter where you come from. Don't have to come from Spanish Harlem or a community of Spanish Harlem. Your struggle doesn't have to be the same as the next person. Struggle to own your story and use your experiences to enhance the work that you do and the profession that you will be. Now we come. We're in a time where everyone wants to have, I feel, a certain story or hide a certain part of who they are because of what people are telling us we should be, or what people are telling us that our people are stories that we need to value. And I think it's very important for everyone to hold true to who they are and who they want to be. And don't let anything get in your way when it comes to that. Connect with people, build relationships, and learn the craft that you want to be great at. Whether that is a clinical social worker, a nonprofit leader, doing research in the field, know really make sure that you learn to be the best at what you want to be.

[Episode: Macro Practice and a Path to Leadership with Carlos Velazquez](#)

Peter Sobota [00:49:02] Perfect, perfect for Mike Trump. Thank you so much, Carlos. Thank you for taking the time. And, yeah, thanks for for having this discussion. It was a pleasure.

Carlos Velazquez [00:49:14] Cliched it be there. Maybe next time we talk, we'll be talking about the Mets, the Yankees playing in the World Series. Again, that's a.

Peter Sobota [00:49:20] Whole different podcast, although I'm not yet certain why a man from East Harlem would end up rooting for the Mets over the Yankees. It was a pleasure. And thanks again. Carlos Velasquez. The League of Collaborators who bring you the In Social Work podcast are our director and media gurus, Steve Sterman, Nick Desmet, our savvy graduate production assistant. Say hi Nick. Hello everyone and meet. I'm Peter Szabo. We love bringing you these ideas and are always interested in what you think or what you would like us to ask questions about. Next, go to In Social Work Dawg and let us know. Listen to our podcasts on your favorite podcast delivery system. And thanks for joining us and see you next time, everybody.