

Wynne Leon (00:03)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that takes a deep dive into collaboration.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, co-host Vicki Atkinson and I are with activist and author Karen Olson. Karen is the founder and CEO Emeritus of Family Promise, an organization committed to ending family homelessness. Karen shares the story of her encounter with Millie, a woman experiencing homelessness, and how her decision to not only share a sandwich, but also her time

as she listened to Millie's story, changed her life forever. She tells us how her sons, who are 10 and 12 years old at the time, got involved, and she shares how the notes she received helped shape her mission into something even better, an organization that has involved a million volunteers and is now a nationwide presence. In her book, Met for More,

Karen tells not only her story, but also some of the stories of the people Family Promised has helped, from those who experienced homelessness to the volunteers. In this episode, we talk about some of the reasons we hesitate to help people experiencing homelessness. Karen's guidance is so helpful to direct our efforts in ways that make a difference. This is a great episode.

with a woman who was wired to help others. We know you'll love it.

Karen?

Karen Olson (02:06)

Good to be here with you.

Wynne Leon (02:08)

We are so honored to talk with you. Your book, Meant for More, is so full of heart and hope.

So we're hoping that we could start with an elevator pitch of Meant for More And also if you could describe, because you talk so much about the organization that you founded, Family Promise. If you could talk too about Family Promise and how it provides services to homeless, that would be, I think, a great way to start.

Karen Olson (02:38)

Well, I'll start with the elevator pitch. Great. It seems like we're all looking for more in life, something that's going to fill that inner need. And we often try to fill it by, you know, buying a bigger house or a new car or extravagant vacation or designer handbag. But all of those are short lived. They don't really fill us up.

And so to fill that void or that yearning most people have inside is when you step outside yourself and give to others, you'll find that happiness will catch up with you. And that's what Meant for More is all about. I share my story as well as the story of others.

Family Promise, the organization that I started back in 1986, I wanted to help homeless families. were the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. And I started a local program by mobilizing existing community resources, churches, synagogues, and mosques to provide shelter in their buildings on rotation with each other.

We started out with 11 congregations. To date, we have more than 5,000 involved. And we've helped over a million men, women, and children, not just with shelter, but helping them find housing, jobs, and so on. So it really mobilized the community. the need that was met there was not only for homeless families,

by providing the needed services and shelter, but for the need that many feel in their own hearts to make a difference. And this provided a way that people could work in their own community to prepare a meal, to tutor a child, to come into their own church with their kids and to play with kids who are homeless. So it really mobilized the community.

in an important way and help fulfill the needs of both homeless families and the needs many people feel in their own hearts to make a difference.

80 % of the families that stay with us find housing in about nine weeks, which is kind of remarkable because many shelters don't even track success in helping families have housing and maintain the housing.

Vicki Atkinson (05:26)

Yeah, which is the goal, right? Not just incremental help, but that life sustaining change. You wrote something, Karen, that I think was one of my new favorite opening lines in a book when you know that the author is really going to give you their heart. You wrote, I wrote this book to speak to the profound personal healing that happens when we act on our innate kindness.

Karen Olson (05:34)

Yes.

Vicki Atkinson (05:54)

It just was a beautiful way to begin the story because it's about helping others. But I think the point that you make throughout is it's also that restorative work that we do for ourselves. The world is a very interdependent place, but that was so, so beautiful about healing for the individual. Is that something that just sort of, you always knew that that was going to be the perspective you offered at the beginning?

Karen Olson (06:22)

I didn't really know, but I'm going through my own life. I knew that when I reached out to others, helping them, that I was healing myself too, that it's reciprocal and very, very powerful.

Wynne Leon (06:38)

Yeah. And you talked about the premise of family promise, is, churches, synagogues, mosques together to provide housing on a rotational basis for homeless. And you write, there's much more common ground in most religious ideologies than what might appear on the surface or what we have been led to believe. I knew the only way to make Family Promise work

was if I had the cooperation and connection of congregations of all faiths working together. At the core, every religion believes its mission is to help those less fortunate. So we are successful in pulling together churches, synagogues, and mosques around one common objective, faith and service to others.

Karen Olson (07:12)

Yes.

That's true, and that really worked well. Now, if we had different religious representatives sit around a table representing different faith, they would probably never agree on anything, you know, because they might debate different religious philosophies and so on. It be hard to find a connection. But when you're involved in service like that for homeless families, those differences

are not differences at all because they're bonded by their common desire to serve and to make a difference. So it's never been an issue because when I first started this, I had pastors say, well, you're not going to get this church to work with that church or that synagogue. And I never found that an issue at all because people were not there to debate their different religious beliefs. They were there simply.

to serve and in that serving, they've had so much in common friends were made at, you know, with different congregations. So it's really a beautiful thing. I really didn't know I be building a community, but in fact, that's what I did. I built a community and that's just a beautiful thing more than I ever could have.

imagined it kind of had a life of its own because I just wanted to create shelter. And I actually thought that the rotational model was just a stopgap because I couldn't find a building to provide shelter. And so I mobilize these congregations to work together thinking it was second best, but really

it was the best and I realized that perhaps God didn't want me to find a building, but to build community. when you build community, so much more happens. know, volunteers have donated cars, repaired cars, helped families write resumes, rehearsed for job interviews. Some have become godparents, you know, of,

children in the program. So the community is vast and far bigger than I ever could have imagined. So it makes me smile.

Vicki Atkinson (10:06)

And think what we appreciate about that is your humility throughout, Karen, as you're telling this story, because it's clear that you were a catalyst. sometimes, know, Wynne and I feel like sometimes people that have that philanthropic urge, it's a calling and it's well intended. But once you pull people together, things start to take on a life of their own and you have to be flexible and let things emerge. And what you just described, you know, it was kind of

leaning back a little bit, you know, to let the positive energy just sort of take over. But you're so humble about that. I don't think we've ever talked to someone who received one of the Points of Light awards from, a president. Congratulations.

Karen Olson (10:52)

Thank you. But you know, that's nice, but it's not the real meaning of what I do, or it's not the rewards. Exactly. family's finding housing, the children that now begin to believe in themselves, and so much more.

Vicki Atkinson (11:11)

I think that comes through, that your heart was in the right place, not about recognition for you even when it came. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (11:17)

you start with a story of Millie's, homeless woman that you encountered and bought a sandwich for. But you can, you got your children involved when they were young. Can you tell us the story of Brad and Doug and the sandwiches?

Karen Olson (11:34)

Yes, OK, sure. Well, after I gave the sandwich by chance to a homeless woman who sat outside of Grand Central Station, I had seen her before. on this day, I felt I just couldn't pass her by. So I ran across the street to a deli and got her ham and cheese sandwich and an orange juice. And when I gave it to her, she said, God bless you. I haven't eaten since yesterday. And I stayed.

They're talking to her for a bit and she took my hand in hers and it was a heartfelt moment, almost an opening of my heart and I had crossed an invisible line, you know, because my grandmother had said, don't go near people like that. She didn't even call them homeless at the time. They were bums and so on. So here I had crossed an invisible line and it was so meaningful to me that I told my two sons.

Doug and Brad who were then 10 and 12 about Millie and Doug said, Mom, let's go into New York and give more sandwiches to people like Millie. So that's what we did. We made 50 sandwiches and we ended up going to Port Authority bus terminal and essentially anybody sitting on a bench was not waiting for their

bus, this was on a Sunday night, they were simply homeless. So we made friends.

Vicki Atkinson (13:11)

And you did that for a couple of years. You did. Yeah, it wasn't just a let's do this once. became now. Yeah.

Karen Olson (13:18)

A ritual or something.

Wynne Leon (13:20)

And you and you did were you worried about your kids or you just knew that?

Karen Olson (13:27)

No, not really. I was not worried about them because they were with me and I'm going to have good instincts And I think they do. But these were regular people that we would see Sunday to Sunday that were essentially living in Port Authority

You know, we gave the sandwiches, but I have to say that the sandwich was really just a vehicle to say we cared, because if I didn't give a sandwich.

I guess I could just stop and talk. But what I'm trying to say is the sandwich was much more than just nourishment of the body. It was nourishment of the soul and a chance for us to say we care.

Wynne Leon (14:20)

Right. It's almost like a calling card where you could start that conversation.

Vicki Atkinson (14:29)

And I think one of the things that I appreciated, Karen, is just the reminder that you've made several times that whether it was the sandwich or the conversation, just slowing down to give that person in front of you your attention so that they weren't invisible in that moment because you described so eloquently what it is like to just be on your way, having your day, getting from A to B.

and walking right past humans with no regard whatsoever in the blinders, right? But letting people know they were seen.

Karen Olson (15:07)

Yeah, it's amazing when you think about like a city like New York City, people are hurrying, bustling across the city with a purpose and they walk by people who may have no shoes on, they're lying on the street and we pay no attention to them. And once I began to pay attention, there was no turning back. Once I talked to Millie and talked to others,

That dividing line was no longer there for me. These are just another human who was hurting, you know. If, a woman in a fur coat and a nice handbag was walking in the city and she fell and tripped, everybody would be around her trying to help her. But here we have so many people on the streets.

homeless, you know, and we walk right by them.

So we're seeing them as people and that's what they appreciated, know, to stop and talk to them and, you know, it makes a difference.

Wynne Leon (16:18)

You tell the story of a man named Ed, who I think you're still in contact with. But you didn't want to assume that he was homeless, which I think is something that we all can relate to. don't want to...

Karen Olson (16:24)

Yes, I am.

Wynne Leon (16:36)

You know, we don't want to insult somebody by thinking that they're homeless if they're not. And so one day you hesitated and then the next you figured a new approach, which was to say, can I buy you a cup of coffee? And then you delivered the coffee and listened to his story. Can you talk about some of the reasons that you found that people are too intimidated to help?

Karen Olson (17:01)

When I first saw Ed, it was in the park and he was sleeping and he had some bags near him with clothing and so on. So I assumed he was probably homeless and I was going to.

put a \$20 bill in his bag. And I thought, well, what if he isn't homeless and he wakes up and he's insulted by the \$20 in his bag? So I decided not to, I went back and forth with that, but then I was determined the next time I saw him, if I saw him again, I would talk to him and find that out. I was going into Dunkin Donuts and there was Ed.

sitting on a bench and I said, oh, hello, my name is Karen. You know, he said, I'm Ed. And I said, would you like a coffee? He said, yes. So I got him a coffee and I got one for me. And I sat and I talked with him and he had been homeless for about three years. His mother had died and the little money he got, he spent. he was

you know, just out in the park behind stores was very much alone. And so we talked and I said, you know, do you have a phone? He said, no. And I said, well, let me buy you a phone so you can, you know, talk to your brother and so on. So I first, called my son and I said,

Brad, his man I found to know. It's hard to explain to him. He's in my car and I'm gonna go buy him a phone, whatever. So we went into Summit and bought him a phone and I'm still paying for his phone each month. I just add it to my bill. And now he was able to talk to his brother and so on.

Long story short, now I'm on a task force in Summit for help the homeless and Ed found housing through this task force and he's really, really happy. He has an apartment, a small apartment. It's a three story walk up, but it's right in downtown and he cooks for himself. He looks great now. He's shaven. He's well kept.

you know, and be feeling you know, because once you have a home and other things become possible. So Ed, you know, is really back on his feet and we get together and have lunch sometimes or take him out to celebrate his birthday. So we're friends. I mean, he knows he can call me and.

You know, it's just, it's wonderful to see how well he's doing.

Wynne Leon (20:10)

let me just to quote a little bit from your book. One of the things I often hear from people is that they would love to do something to improve the lives of others, but they never get started because they don't feel they can make an appreciable difference. However, I have learned that even the smallest act of kindness can have a substantial positive effect.

Karen Olson (20:33)

Yes, yes, that's very true. You know, even a smile, but a sandwich or you stop and you talk to stop and talk to someone and make a big, big difference. I know once there was a woman in New York City who sat at 56th Street and 7th Avenue. She was on just sitting on the ground there. She was obviously homeless and she had no coat.

And it was cold. was November. And so I asked her, I said, I'm going to give you my coat. She said, no, because if I take your coat, you won't have one. said, okay, I'm going to go buy you one. And I did. I went to like two blocks and I bought her a new coat. And when I came back, she smiled and she said, my gosh, thank you. And she put it on. And so

My hope is that that coat kept her warm, but I know that it also warmed her heart that somebody cared enough to do something like that, that she was seen, and I went out of my way to help her. So.

Vicki Atkinson (21:48)
One person at a time.

Wynne Leon (21:50)
There's a woman that, in Seattle, we have a newspaper that homeless people sell. so I got to know this woman and she was just transitioning into, some housing that she, that, that had been built. And my mom was, was moving at the same time into senior housing. So she was downsizing, you know, all the dishes that she needed. So I arranged, you know, for

Vicki Atkinson (21:56)
in Chicago too.

Wynne Leon (22:17)
my mom's dishes and sheets and towels to help, Susan, refurbish her place. But the funny thing about the dishes is they were things that my dad who's passed loved and they were brightly colored. And so I see Susan and she says every time, you know, I get this bright, they were sort of, ~ Southwest colors, bright blue or orange, or it's sort of that burnt orange color. Every time I see those plates, it just makes me smile because I

Think about the family that it came from.

Karen Olson (22:51)
Yeah, nice. Wonderful.

Vicki Atkinson (22:54)
I think one of the things that Wynne and I really appreciated, Karen, is that you just head on deal with the fact that we need to let go, even now, know, 2025 of the stereotypes about homeless individuals, you know, and just treat each person as a person, because I love the storytelling that you do, because there's a story for each of them, and it's not.

what people sometimes want to project upon the homeless person. It is very much there but for the grace of God, go I. It's this very narrow space where they're okay, they're in housing, they have jobs, they don't. But you do such a good job of that without ~ being preachy in any way. It just comes across very authentic because it's from your heart. Well done.

Karen Olson (23:47)
35 % of all those who are homeless are family members and you don't see families on the street. They're either living in their cars or doubled or tripled up with friends or family members. So you don't see them, but yet that represents 35%. And take Hope, for example, she was in our program and she was a waitress in a diner.

So one day you could be in that diner and she would be serving you. But then a week or two later, she could be homeless. And in fact, that happened to her. woke up one morning, she had a one

year old daughter, Olivia, and she woke up one morning and her eyes were like frosted over. She couldn't see well and it began to get worse and worse. And she ultimately

couldn't drive, she lost her license. She lost her license. She couldn't go to work. When she couldn't go to work, she lost money. And when she lost money, she couldn't pay her rent. And the next thing you know, she was homeless. But she came to Family Promise and she not only received shelter and needed services, but she was able to get back on her feet. And Lou and April.

a couple who were volunteers became godparents for Olivia. And they're still friends today. She also got a job through contacts of volunteers at Verizon. And today she's manager of this store. And she met a man, she fell in love with Bo and they had a baby, James. So she's back to being an intact family.

and happy, but she was homeless, you know? ~ so it's a slippery slope once you lose, know? I mean, they say half of Americans are a paycheck or two away from losing their house or becoming homeless. So it can happen suddenly and it's a downward slide.

Wynne Leon (26:11)
Yeah.

mean, hope is at such a beautiful story. And I love that you not only tell your story in this book, but also the story of people who have experienced homeless and the people who are volunteered to help them. mean, it's just such a fantastic way to bring it all together and also illustrate the way that our country's policies fall short. What do you the impact of your book will be?

Karen Olson (26:41)

Well, I hope that people see that they can make a difference in a big way or a small way, that they'll be kinder to one another, that they'll not just reach out to help people who are experiencing homelessness, but reach out to others, whether it's picking up the newspapers they're piling up on your neighbor's front porch or giving

a meal to someone or holding the door open, being kinder. But I also hope that I know that even, you you could have a hundred times the number of volunteers that we have and we have close to a million volunteers, but that's not going to solve the deep systemic issues of homelessness. I would hope that policies would change, but they only change through advocacy. And now we're looking

at severe cutbacks in social services in this country. So we're gonna find more and more people becoming homeless because you can't take away the safety net. Many people rely on that and now without the safety net, they're gonna find themselves homeless. So my hope would be that people who get to know homeless people or even if they don't get to know them,

that people would become involved in advocacy and speak to their legislators and talk about appropriating needed funds for housing and other services. Because volunteers alone can't solve the problem. It's only when there's a partnership between government and the private sector that's really, really the answer.

I can't tell you when that's going to happen.

Vicki Atkinson (28:39)

But I think in the interim, what you've done, knowing that bigger systemic change, resetting, putting more humanity into policies, protecting those who need our help, in the interim, while that's happening, I think your book is so invitational, Karen, to do those things that are right in front of us and not just carry on, whether it's bringing in the newspapers or acknowledging people in need.

just those small considerations and courtesy and kindness. And Wynne and I are so struck by the stories that you tell, you don't know what the turning point is going to be for someone. It might be an act of kindness. It might be buying a sandwich or helping to buy a phone or a conversation or a coffee, but it could be something so small in our eyes that could be a turning point for someone else.

especially when I think about individuals that I know of who don't feel worthy. And when an offer of help comes and the dismissing of it. So I think there's a lot of work to be done, you know, just to say, I see you, you do have worth, I'm going to sit and have coffee with you, tell me your story. So I think your book does that in such a beautiful way. It fills a void, I think that needs to be filled.

Karen Olson (30:06)

I hope so. hope it inspires others or for those who are already reaching out in so many ways. I hope it's an acknowledgement for all that they do. ~

Wynne Leon (30:17)

Yeah. Well, as you wrote, compassion is contagious. So thank you so much for coming on and talking about your amazing story, your wonderful book and all the incredible work you've done.

Karen Olson (30:21)

Yeah.

Thank you, Wynne and thank you, Vicki. Thank you for being with you. And by the way, if people would like to get my book, Meant for More, Following Your Heart and Finding Your Purpose, can get it on Amazon, bookshops.com, or Barnes & Noble.

Vicki Atkinson (30:35)

Pleasure.

Wynne Leon (30:37)

Our pleasure.

Okay, and we'll link that in the show notes.

Vicki Atkinson (30:55)

Thank you, Karen. You too. All the best. Bye bye.

Wynne Leon (31:06)

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