

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode #87 of Conjuring Up Courage. As a reminder, the show has officially changed names and will no longer be known as the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. With this name change comes an expansion of scope that will allow me to speak with even more amazing people doing impactful work in the world. While things may look and sound a little different around here, this is the same show and I'm bringing the same style that you have come to know and love through over 80 episodes thus far. So, let's get to it.

Today's guest is fellow Austinite Shaleiah Fox. By day, she oversees fundraising for Black Studies at UT Austin, and by night, she is the co-founder of Fresh Chefs Society, a local non-profit dedicated to creating positive life experiences with food for youth in foster care. In our conversation, we discussed some misconceptions about the foster care system, the importance of giving kids in foster care opportunities to exercise agency, the multifaceted power of food, equity in philanthropy, and more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/87. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/87.

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves so they can be more of who they are and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be. I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same. Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

Hi Shaleiah! Thank you so much for making time to be on the show today. I'm so glad that you're here.

Shaleiah Fox: Oh, thank you so much for asking me to come on. I'm super excited about our conversation.

Shohreh: Me too! So, to start, please tell me a little bit more about you, what has led you to the work you're doing in the world, and what you're passionate about.

Shaleiah: Absolutely. So, maybe I'll start with what I'm passionate about. I am passionate about community. I'm passionate about representation. I'm passionate about access to the beauty that food really gives beyond just sort of nourishing and making sure that we survive. But it allows us to create community and find our own cultural identity, and perhaps you've always had it and you're just fully supporting it and nurturing that identity. And so that's really what drives me in terms of passion. I think food has been a connector for me in ways that were necessary to forge my own way forward and finding my own meaning of what family actually means.

So, I grew up in the foster care system, so when I was 18 in college on my own, food was really how I sort of built community. It was how I expressed my love, it was how I said "thank you," it was how we gathered. And so it's really been a transformative vehicle for me. And being able to transform community through food has been something I've really learned a lot about over the years and even most recently it's shifting, right? It's making me think about beyond just the actual provision of food, but how food can agitate for social justice, which is something really new for me in the last couple of years.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

So what I've been able to do really marrying my experience in the foster care system, my love for food, and the natural language that food gives us to talk to those that we don't necessarily know, but those that are in our community and around us, is I've been able to work with some amazing people throughout the years to start, to co-found an organization called Fresh Chefs Society. And we empower young people in the foster care system through food. And we do that through job training. We do that through education. And we do that through way finding, just simply in life, and building relationships, and building community.

Shohreh: That's amazing! I love the work that you're doing, and I came to it through Riley Blanks who was on a past episode of the podcast and gave Fresh Chefs Society a shout-out in that episode of the podcast. I will link to it in the show notes for those who haven't heard Riley's episode, but I'm so glad that she connected us and I can't wait to talk more about Fresh Chefs Society. But first, I thought we might discuss foster care a little bit.

You mentioned that you grew up in the foster care system, and I feel like many people's knowledge about foster care comes primarily from what they've seen on TV and in movies. And I know everyone's experiences are different, but are there certain things that you wish more people knew and understood about foster care?

Shaleiah: That's a great question. So, when I think about foster care, I think it keeps people from learning more about it is because of how overwhelming the whole issue feels. At the end of the day, people assume—and it's a right assumption—that when children are removed or young people are removed from their homes, it's because it's an end result of abuse. And while that is the majority of cases, a bigger majority, most of them is due to neglect.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

And neglect is such a huge term. It could be substance abuse. It could be the parents have lost consistent housing. It could be that they were left at home because parents are working two jobs just to sustain them. So I mention all that because there's this narrative that gets perpetuated that the state has to step in and take care of children because the parents are bad. And I do know from experience that it can be that parents are bad, and I also know from experience it's because systems that are set up in place to keep people poor also keep poor people from being good parents sometimes.

And so, I think if there was anything that I would want to say is that foster care is not a solution always. And I think that the more we look at why children end up in the foster care system, we see that it's more about how we as a society take care of one another. How policies keep people from sort of being present for their children and create these situations where the state has deemed themselves the best caretakers, which is not the case.

It's an under-resourced system. It's an under-staffed system. And really, you are taking children out of a situation that even if it is something that is detrimental to their health, they don't want to leave. Because at the end of the day, it's your home. It's your parents. It's all you know. And so, if you have somebody, a stranger who you do not know, who is coming in and saying, "Your way of life, how you're living, is not good enough. Here, let us show you a separate way," you can understand how off-putting that might be. And even when you look at the history of foster care, it very much is rooted in some pretty scary racial dynamics. I mean, it's not an equitable system.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

And so, there's so many layers. All that to say that foster care is not the answer, and foster care is incredibly overwhelming. And so, when somebody sits down to like think about what is my role? How do I make a difference? Understandably so, they quickly become really taken back of the insurmountable task of playing a small part, and so they just don't do anything.

And so, what I, and with Fresh Chefs and other organizations that I know, is that community-serving organizations come in and they provide platforms for the community to get involved and do their part to take care of young people in foster care. And so, I would just say that that moment where you become overwhelmed in, is probably the moment you likely should lean in and figure out where it is that you belong.

Because here's the deal. We care about what the government does with our taxes. We care about what the government does with our water, our air quality. When a child is removed from their home, they become a ward of the state, and therefore, our children. As a mother, I am incredibly protective over my children. That same sense of responsibility and protection should extend to young people in foster care. Not everybody has the bandwidth or the capacity to participate in that level, but there's always a way to do something.

If I can say anything to people whenever they hear anything about foster care and they wonder what they should do to impact and make it better for young people, I think it's just find your way to be involved. There are so many wonderful organizations in Austin and Texas that are doing the work on the state level, but then also on a local level. And it's really how we show up for our kids as we give to those organizations. Outside of becoming a foster parent or a social worker, which I know that's not

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

everybody's schtick, but everybody can sort of pick an organization that is loving these young people and love them with their financial support or even their time as well.

Shohreh: So many important things that you mentioned in there, and even just going back to what you said about this state definition of neglect, right, and how a lot of these things you mentioned are things that have state solutions potentially to them, right? So instead of saying, oh, if someone is struggling with substance abuse, we take their children, it's like, well, what if we help people to not struggle with substance abuse? And if someone is struggling with access to food, well, we can give them food instead of saying, oh, well, let's get the children somewhere where they can have food, you know? So it is very backwards.

Shaleiah: Yeah, I think that it's the way in which that we think government is supposed to function, and it's rooted in something that has a deep-seated history of racism, white supremacy, and we've just not stopped to question. And people are starting to question, let me tell you. It is happening. But it's only because they realize that the true resources that would be necessary to do this the right way, there's not the political will to truly invest. And so we've got to shift our focus and really invest in the families before we even get to the point of taking them away.

Shohreh: So there's kind of these two big areas of concern where it's that piece of it, where we want to get to a point where we don't need foster care anymore as a solution and instead we can take care of these families so we can keep families together in almost all cases, and then there's the piece of, well, we do have children in foster care, and we need to care for them, and provide for them, and make sure that they're set up so that when they're

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

phased out of the foster care system, that they can go out into the world and be successful.

Shaleiah: Absolutely. And to know, really, the incredible resilience that is baked into young people who go through something like foster care, and to really celebrate that as opposed to the statistics that we see, that we know, what ends up being the narrative around foster care. To stop and think about, what if we invested in that resilience? In that bit of them that makes them incredibly special? What would that look like? What would it be to flip the script and think about this population in a way that guarantees their success? I don't think we've made it that far yet.

Shohreh: Yeah, I agree with you. There is this sort of societal writing off of kids in foster care of, you know, they're too far gone, they've seen too much, we can't help them, instead of seeing the potential and resilience that is there.

Shaleiah: Absolutely.

Shohreh: And of course, this is something that you're working on with Fresh Chefs, and I know one of the reasons that you started this is because you saw how important it is to provide agency to kids in foster care. So tell me about the power of agency and why you felt like food was a great inroad for that?

Shaleiah: All I had for my experience growing up in foster care, and I don't think I really came into the power of my struggle until I was around 18 or so when I started volunteering and giving back. And I started working with young people in the foster care system. I started out as a guardian ad litem in Florida, but here in Texas we call them CASAs. And so, I was their court-appointed special advocate. And so I was their voice.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

You had case managers who had an obligation to the state. You had lawyers who had an obligation to the courts or to the parents. You really served as their voice, and you talked about what was best for young people. And so, really understanding that role, number one, it is to make sure that young people are safe, but number two, it's also to give them a piece of agency, right? So no one else could be listening to you about what you want, but you have this one person who is charged with staying by your side while you are going through the foster care system.

And then the other thing that happened was I started doing some volunteer work with a state advocacy organization, and what we did is we trained young people in foster care to go to the legislature and advocate for policies that made their life better and made their outcomes more successful. And so, it was a group of young people. They ranged from 16 to 18. At this point I was like 22, so you know, I was really old [laughs] and wise. And so we would get this group together. We would plan out our advocacy, our legislative agenda. But then they also would want to plan these really elaborate, wonderful parties for the younger people in foster care.

And so, we're like, alright, let's do it. And we'd sit down and we'd make a list of restaurants we were going to ask for free food, and they would say, "No, let's cook." And so we would gather in someone's kitchen, all of us cooking, and just the power of showing them of how to mince a piece of garlic in an easy way, like a shortcut, see it, learn it, then turn around and model that behavior to someone else instantly? Just that belief of self-efficacy, that I am capable of learning something new and then I am capable of turning around and teaching it to somebody else, that is agency.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

And I think that food provides such a safe medium to empower that sense of agency, to watch it grow, and then for them to take it and do their own leadership work through that is something that is an incredibly underutilized platform. It has been through food that we've allowed young people to get that sense of agency back. Teaching them how to cook. Teaching them soft job training skills. Also in the culinary industry, but stuff like how to communicate, how to interview, how to come up with an email that doesn't say, "Angel69," you know? [Laughter] These really basic pieces of existing in society.

And to do that through food as a medium and bringing people in to do that work with us has been an incredible tool for building agency. We're not creating something; it is there within these young people. We just need help finding it. And we need people to get out of the way and let these young people sort of find it on their own.

Shohreh: 'Cause I imagine in foster care there's a lot of micromanaging of your day, everything that you do, so many decisions are being made for you. And so there aren't as many spaces to do these kinds of things. Even just looking at food as the specific example, right? You're talking about things like learning to prepare foods, experiencing sharing a meal and how it can feel to feed others. I think people who haven't experienced foster care may take for granted and assume that's just a part of everyone's experiences growing up.

Shaleiah: So food is a powerful mechanism for control in the foster care system. First of all, you have no control of where you live, and then once you're in either a group home setting or if you're lucky enough to go to an actual foster care home, you know, unless you have a foster parent that really has the bandwidth to help walk you through what it is like to cook, they're doing

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

the cooking for you because they've got other kids and they just don't have the time. Maybe they don't value that time it would take to show someone how to cook. So there's that. You're getting whatever is given to you. And not that that would be unlike what would happen at your home, but it would be your home, right? It would be meals that your parents know that you like or don't like.

And then there's another layer of certain homes where there's actually locks on their fridge, there's locks on the cupboards. You could even get into more rare situations, but they do happen where there's actually homes that aren't feeding young people on any sort of regular cadence because they assume that they don't need to be fed. They're not really understanding the full history of food that young people come, or even the trauma around food that young people are coming to their home with. And so in order to control a lot of people with different eating habits, the easiest thing for foster parents and foster homes to do sometimes is to put locks on things.

And so, even though systematically for them I see their logic, imagine what that is telling a young person in a home that they are not familiar with, that they didn't want to be in in the first place. It sends a message that you are not worthy, first of all, to choose your own meal or your own snack, but you're also not trusted, right? And so the trauma that can stem from that, you see food hoarding, you see insecurity in different issues around food really stem from this lack of control and this lack of agency that can be developed out of food access within the foster care system.

You know, I can think of one home where we actually got fed separate meals than the family. Like, the family, the actual family of the foster parents. We were in one room—we were eating what was given by the

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

state—and they were in another room eating a completely different meal. And so, again, it's not how I would do it. I guess I could see what they were thinking, but what message does that send to that young person?

Shohreh: I'm someone who works with a lot of people on issues with food. I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor, and so a lot of people come to me who have had food access issues in the past, who have had restrictive dieting, parents who tried to control their weight in ways that really messed them up and messed up their relationship with food. And as you're saying that, I'm just thinking about the distrust that that creates in children around their own bodies and things as simple as hunger and fullness signals and realizing, well, if they have no agency in when they eat and what they eat, like, you really learn to not trust yourself. And as someone who works with a lot of adults on that, I know how hard it is to come back to your body when you've had that long history of distrust.

Shaleiah: Instead of it being something that could easily be healing. It could be a way to ease the transition, make a young person feel more comfortable. I mean, imagine if a part of the intake process would be the asking, what's their favorite foods? What are the things they enjoy? So that could be something that could be all set up and ready to go for whenever that young person enters that home. It's those sorts of systematic pieces that are so far off the radar for the foster care system, which is why it's so important for the community to come in and fill that gap whenever it has the opportunity.

Shohreh: Yes, and just like the cross-cultural impact too, because if you have Black and Brown children who are being fostered in white homes and all of a sudden traditional foods that they've grown up with are no longer available, or even they might be even told, oh, well those are bad or

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

they're unhealthy, that's another way that just undermines what they've learned and grown up with.

Shaleiah:

I'm so glad that you pointed that out because that's absolutely true. And to that same point, the power of unlocking memories for those same young people who've been denied that cultural identity in the future is, you can't say it strong enough. Because I can think back to sitting in the kitchen and cooking with young people, and the smell of something that they can remember cooking with their grandmother, and a grandmother who they have not thought about or a family member who they have not thought about for years, but all of a sudden all those memories come rushing into their head because of one smell from one meal that they're cooking.

And those memories can be painful because for so long they were points of comfort and those points of comfort are no longer accessible. But that's really where the healing begins is when you can sort of remember what it was like to feel loved. What it was like to be nurtured. And then you can start working your way back toward that, and you can do that through food. You can do that through creating meals that bring back those familial ties that a system like foster care can strip away. It's pretty powerful.

Shohreh:

I'm curious what the experience is like of these kids who come in initially working with Fresh Chefs and then kind of the growth that you see over time as they're going through the program. And I know that y'all have also worked in different parameters given the fact that a lot of foster kids don't have a very set schedule, it's not necessarily that they are gonna be able to come back exactly every week at certain times or anything like that. So I'd love to hear just about your experiences of actually working with them and supporting them given the parameters that they do have to work within.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

Shaleiah: Thank you for that question. I think what always just makes me smile and warms my heart is the way they let their guard down at our events. And I know it's because with food it's such a neutralizer. We're not gonna talk about the fact that you're in foster care. There's no sort of hidden agenda around nutrition information that we want you to obtain. We want you just to come and have a delicious meal, and ask questions about how I'm chopping this onion, and ask questions about why I'm putting sweet potato in these biscuits. It just allows them for a minute to forget the fact that they are where they are.

And I never get tired of seeing that ease in the shoulder that they have. Of the laughter. And then the staff coming up to me afterwards and saying, "This person actually just came from being on campus and had a disciplinary action and they weren't going to be able to come, but I'm so glad we brought them because we've not seen this smile in days." And so I think that what food allows to make possible, and just in a matter of minutes, cannot be understated.

The other piece that I think is just to see their willingness to try new foods and to really explore origins of foods, because these are brilliant minds. And so when you find something that excites those minds, they're limitless into how far they'll dive and go deep into. And so that's always been really fun to watch, the questions that they ask to the chefs, to the farmers when we go out and do tours of farms. Because we're all about building positive food experiences for young people, so we're in small kitchens, we're on farms, we're in massive production lines. We are in hotels downtown. And just to see, you know, not only the environment just really transfix them, but just the actual process of food making be something that they really get intrigued about.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

And then the other piece is that they stay connected to us. I think because we're so accessible and we meet them where they're at, they know that if they don't show up for that program like they said they would, and it could be a month until we hear from them again, or six months, or a year, they come back and they are so grateful to know that we're still around and that there's not anything they can't ask of us. We can't always deliver or provide, but we can at least make a connection for them so that they can get one step closer to whatever it is they need.

And really, this pandemic just drove home the point of how much we are family for so many of these young people because they work in the food industry, a lot of them. Food industry is, I think, still one of the hardest industries hit with all this. And they're not in the high-paying jobs, right? So they're one of the first jobs to get cut. And they lost their homes, they lost their stability, and we were who they called. And being able to step in and to provide housing, food assistance, get diapers delivered, meals delivered, I think that the only reason why they felt comfortable enough to come to us during their greatest time of need is because they trusted us and because they allowed us in from day one. And that was only possible, I truly believe, because of food.

Shohreh: And it sounds to me like you are creating a space where they can show up as they are, and they don't get nearly as many opportunities for that as other kids. Where they're just celebrated for who they are and allowed to ask questions and be curious without being told they're bad or wrong. Like, that's so powerful.

Shaleiah: Absolutely! They get some incredibly exclusive opportunities. I mean, they are from Austin. They are as obsessed with the food scene as, you know, the most well-curated foodie. So for them to be able to have access to

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

some of the spaces that we've had and be able to say, not everybody gets this. You are getting this for precisely who you are as a foster care youth. Through no fault of your own. It's not an identity you want, but it's one you have, and not only are we gonna celebrate that, we are gonna give something special to you because you deserve it.

Shohreh: That's amazing. I have to ask, how have you adapted to the pandemic?

Shaleiah: [Laughs] Oh lord! So, not very well—no, I'm just kidding. [Laughter] So, one of the things that we've been exploring, 'cause we serve right now, primarily the Austin area because we are a pretty small operation, but what we've been able to do is we've been able to continue with the food joy that we bring to young people. So what we've started is we brought back a program, it's called, It's on Fresh Chefs, and what we do simply, is we say, hey, what do y'all want to eat this week? They let us know. We partner with an Austin restaurant or caterer that has been good to us in the part, who has supported our programming—and we pay them, we don't ask for a discount—and we feed young people in foster care.

We drop off meals. Whatever it is that they want, we drop off. So we've started doing that, and we've partnered with businesses and different funders over the summer to make that possible. First of all, staying connected to them until we can meet again, but just saying, food right now is our greatest source of pleasure right now.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Shaleiah: You know, having a great meal and being able to sort of take a break from the kitchen and support our local restaurants. And so being able to extend that joy has been really, really important. And so now we're working on taking a step further, whereas after we provide the meal, if the young

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

people are like, I want to learn how to make that, we are providing them instructional video and all of the ingredients and the cooking utensils that they need to make the meal at their home.

So, we started off with just food, joy, and now we're bringing in that educational component back in and really working on how we make this a part of our overall programming so we can scale it up and really bring more of these efforts to people in foster care. But really, right after everything closed, we were in crisis intervention mode. We were just putting people up in hotels and getting groceries delivered and helping with housing primarily. It was pretty stark there for a bit.

Shohreh: Right, the pandemic in Austin in particular really increased food insecurity for a lot of families. I know that a lot of the organizations in Austin were trying to step up and get donations of food and money to be able to feed more people because all of a sudden, overnight, you know, you have thousands of people who just can't put food on the table anymore.

Shaleiah: Absolutely. We always know the importance of food, but it's just one of those things that you stop and say, "Is this really still a problem in a country as rich and plentiful, that we still have people who struggle to find something to eat?" I think it's one of the sad parts of our humanity.

Shohreh: There's many things we can have shame about in the U.S., but certainly that we are one of the richest countries in the world—oh, and that, you know, billionaires exist—and we can't afford to feed everybody here really makes you question what's going on.

So, for those of us who may not have the desire to start a whole organization or a foundation but do want to become more rooted in the

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

communities where we live and work, are there ways you can think of that we can give back in a more effective and caring way?

Shaleiah:

Absolutely. I think what we're seeing right now in this new age of philanthropy is that there is an opportunity to give to the organizations that are doing the work. And I think that in Austin we have no shortage of non-profit organizations who are out there doing the work. I think there's close to 7,000. We've got the great platform I Live Here I Give Here provides through Amplify Austin and a number of other giving campaigns throughout the year.

But what I think that we're seeing is that the communities that stay systematically oppressed and locked out of a high quality of life, are the organizations that are being left out of the greatest share of philanthropy. And here's what I mean by that: is that I think we have a tendency to give to the organizations that have the staying power, the brand recognition. The ones that we know that have been around for a long time. And if we look closely at those organizations, they're very rarely Black and Brown-led, and they're very rarely serving communities that have the highest need. It may be that their mission encompasses those communities, you know, if the mission is to sort of increase literacy or something more broader, but I'm talking about the organizations that are on the ground, that are working in the racial and social-justice space, and that the people who the communities that they aim to serve are part of the decision-making teams. Those are the organizations that are systematically underfunded.

And so, when we think about our role in philanthropy, right? Our role in empowering and fueling philanthropy to make changes where our government will not and cannot, we have to be sure that we are giving to

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

the organizations who are doing this work through the racial equity lens. And that means that they're also hiring the people that they aim to serve, and they've got those people in positions of power. And so that's really my challenge is as people are really looking at this space differently, understanding who they're actually giving to, and maybe more importantly, looking at who they're not giving to and why.

Shohreh:

Thank you for saying that. That is such an important point because philanthropy as a whole tends to be fairly white-led, as you mentioned. And we have this issue where you have white folks making decisions about what is "best" for people in majority Black and Brown communities that they're not a part of. And they're coming in with biases that they may not even know that they have, ideas about what is best that come from a culture of whiteness instead of being honoring of other cultures that are out there, and that is a huge problem because you're gonna end up causing further harm to people that you say that you're trying to help.

Shaleiah:

I think that it's not that their heart's not in the right place. I think that there's nothing wrong with people, with the majority giving to make the world better. In fact, that's really what they should be doing. That's how it makes things more equitable. But I think that to say that these organizations are the best people to do the job are completely ignoring the communities of color who have been doing this work for centuries and that are doing the work currently, you just don't know about them.

If there is an organization that is white-led doing the work, I guarantee you there is an organization that is Black and Brown-led doing the work more effectively, they just don't have the infrastructure in place to complete the reports and tell the story the way that *you* are used to hearing it. And I think therein lies the problem.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Shaleiah Fox

And what happens is now you've got these organizations that are reading the writing. They've got it. They now have the board retreats where they're focusing on DEI, and they're looking at their policies and they're making changes, and that is great. But what we have to stop doing is rewarding them for the work that they didn't get right from the beginning, and shifting where we're giving to the organizations that have gotten it right from the beginning.

Shohreh:

And I think that a lot of times these organizations can tend to fall into this saviorism complex of, again, the heart's in the right place, we want to help people, but coming in and saying, "Well, we are the only ones who can help because we have the money, and the power, and the infrastructure." And it's like, what if you put that money, and power, and infrastructure behind actual people in those communities and let them make the decisions and lead? And this leads to all kinds of problems about how people don't like when other people are leading and they're not leading. But this is such a great example of where it is better to step back and take direction from those communities instead of trying to think that you know what's best for them.

Shaleiah:

Absolutely! And stop and think, why are you in a position to better lead, or theoretically better lead? To what community's detriment has it been that has allowed you to be successful in this space and them not to be successful?

Shohreh:

Right, how did you get that money, power, and infrastructure in the first place?

Shaleiah:

Yeah, exactly. And then if you start to look at it's not necessarily because you are better equipped or that you are even doing it right, it's just that no one has been in this space, or by you being in that space you have locked

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

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other people out to maybe even have the opportunity to do it better. Or you've just taken the focus.

And again, I think that the idea that there's not enough room for more than one organization or entity in the game to address any of the social societal issues that we've talked about today, I think is a ridiculous notion. I think there's room for all of these ideas and all of these organizations, but there's even more room for more equitable distribution of resources through philanthropic giving.

Shohreh: So, for those listening, this is a really good point for y'all of when you are looking to give, you are looking to volunteer your time, specifically make a point to look at the structure of these organizations. Look at who's in charge, who's on the boards. Are there people who look like the communities that they're trying to help, and if not, go find a different organization that does look like that to give your money to.

Shaleiah: Yeah, and give your money to them with no strings attached. I think that that's also something that's really hard for white benefactors, is because, to your point, with that money they want to make decisions. And it really is about giving that money and say, "I'm giving this money to you because I already know that you know what you're doing, you don't need me."

Shohreh: Again, yes, having that trust factor of you are gonna know better about what to do here than me. And I also want to say to people, this doesn't mean that you can't get involved in these communities just because, you know, you don't share the same skin color, the same life circumstances. You can. It's just about making sure that you're taking direction from people who are in those communities so that you're not causing more harm.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

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- Shaleiah:** Absolutely! The fact that we have to say these clarifying points is because we both know that we've been in rooms where people are like, but wait, but, it's not me, I just want... If you are having that reaction to what we're saying right now, think about that. Work through that right now. If you are having that response, then you specifically, or having your presence in this organization, is exactly what we're talking about.
- Shohreh:** Yes, if that discomfort is coming up for you, as we always talk about on the podcast, you need to lean into that discomfort and try to get to the root of it and understand where is this coming from, what programming do I have that makes me believe these certain things? Because it's very important.
- Shaleiah:** It's hard. It's hard work. It's important work, but it's hard work. And we all feel it in some areas. Some less than others, but I mean, I think it's important to know that you're not alone in feeling that. But also, deal with that before you go try and help other people. [Laughter]
- Shohreh:** Uh, yes. As we talk about a lot on the podcast, nobody grew up in a world of justice and a culture of justice. And so we have to learn that for ourselves, realize what biases we have, and start to undo it. Again, ideally before you go out and try to work in these communities. So something to be aware of for yourself if you're having any feelings in listening to this conversation.
- Shaleiah:** Absolutely. And if there's anything that's come out of this movement of wanting to learn more and be more intentional, is that there's no shortage of resources and books to educate yourself, and ask your peers, or people who are like you, about these questions so that you don't create that extra work for these organizations to have to, in the process of uplifting these communities, educate you on top of that.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

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- Shohreh:** Exactly. Thank you so much for being here, Shaleiah. It has been so awesome to talk to you.
- Shaleiah:** Oh, I agree. Thank you so very much for this opportunity. Big hugs to Riley for connecting us.
- Shohreh:** Yes, big thank you to Riley. So for those listening, how can people find you and learn more about Fresh Chefs Society, and are there ways that Austin locals can help with the organization or even folks outside of the community?
- Shaleiah:** Absolutely. So we are on all the social media channels, it's just Fresh Chefs, "chefs" plural. Our website is www.freshchefs.org. In terms of getting involved, because it used to be that we would have you come and help us do a cooking class, help us shop for—
- Shohreh:** Hey, someday the pandemic will end!
- Shaleiah:** Exactly! One of those days. So get on our list, and then when that time comes we'll be coming knockin' at your door. But I think one of the biggest things is that we do want to build a library of video content of people just cooking the meals that they love that are simple, that are inexpensive, that speak to them in some way. So this is an open call for anybody that wants to help us build that library. They can go to our website, click on the "contact us" link, and then email us at, it's info@freshchefs.org. And then we can start that conversation to see how we can get that information for you. Because I think that this is an excellent opportunity to lean on our community and start crowdsourcing video content on food that we love and that nurtures us in more ways than one.

Conjuring Up Courage

#87

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Shohreh: Oh my god, that's such a cool opportunity. Y'all, if you like to cook, this would be a fun way that you could just film it, and provide that, and you can be anywhere in the world to do that. Amazing!

Shaleiah: And it could be low tech, it could be high tech. I mean, it's all of the above.

Shohreh: That's awesome. Well, I'll definitely put all of the links you just mentioned in the show notes. I will also specifically mention that, how they can reach out if they want to get involved in that way. And thank you again for the work that you're doing here in the Austin community. It is so important, and I am so glad to know you.

Shaleiah: Oh, thank you so, so, so, so much for this opportunity. It's just been a pure joy, and I loved listening to a couple of your podcasts in preparation. You're doing really good work. I can feel the warmth come through.

Shohreh: Thank you. I appreciate that.

[Music plays]

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