



**Bill Campbell:**

Hello and welcome to Coffee, Tea and Philanthropy with your host Bill Campbell. I'm a nonprofit professional with over 18 years working in nonprofits, and over that time I've met some amazing change makers and I wanted to share them with you, share their stories and how they've inspired me. I hope that you enjoy our time together and I look forward to showing you how you can change the community by following the path of those that have come before.

Hello listeners. Welcome to another episode of Coffee, Tea and Philanthropy, where we have a conversation over a cuppa to explore those moments when people choose to make an impact in their communities. I'm excited to introduce my guest, Milton Little Jr., who is the CEO of the United Way of Greater Atlanta. Milton Little Jr. became the first African-American president of the United Way of Greater Atlanta in 2007, leading the organization to raise over half a billion dollars for local community needs. Previously, he served as the chief operating officer and interim president of the National Urban League. Little's focus on improving child wellbeing has earned him numerous accolades, including the Council on Foundation's Distinguished Service Award, the Turknett Leadership Character Award and recognition as one of Atlanta magazine's Atlanta Power 500. Welcome, Milton.

**Milton Little:**

Well, thank you, Bill. It's good to hear your voice and there was a time you would've also said I was your friend, so I take that personally.

**Bill Campbell:**

Yes. I sometimes reveal the friendship later in the conversation, but yes, and friend and former boss, I used to work at the United Way for Greater Atlanta and just tip of the hat to the great leadership you've done for this community. So let's dive right in. What's your go-to in the morning? Coffee or tea?

**Milton Little:**

Coffee. No sugar, cream with a hint of French vanilla.

**Bill Campbell:**

Oh, nice. You put a little vanilla syrup or is it more like ...

**Milton Little:**

Absolutely sugar free.

**Bill Campbell:**

Sugar free. There we go. Nice. I like it. Coffee for me too. So as we get started, let's talk a little about where you grew up and sort of any motivations that have led you to the life of sharing and impact that you've created.

**Milton Little:**

Well, thank you. And again, thanks for the opportunity to be here. I was born in Queens, New York, raised in Brooklyn, New York and Roosevelt, Long Island. Roosevelt, being a suburb of Manhattan about 45 minutes east of New York City. I was lucky enough to have mom and dad at home. I had a sister who came six years after I was born. Most of my time in New York was spent on Long Island and it was an idyllic community. Secret, one of my childhood classmates was Howard Stern, and so Howard and I were



in the elementary and junior high school together. So it was a community of just wonderful people. Little league, chorus. I was in the orchestra, played youth sports. I mean, it couldn't have been a more idyllic way to grow up.

**Bill Campbell:**

Well, that's great. So you're a community and thought leader in the Atlanta area, and I was just curious how you found your way to the city. What brought you here and how'd you call it home?

**Milton Little:**

So this is actually my second stint in Atlanta. I left New York and came to Atlanta to go to Morehouse College and spent four years here as a young man and then went back to New York and a few other cities across as I pursued my career. And then in 2007 made my way back here because of the opportunity to take on the role of leading the United Way of Greater Atlanta. And it's just been a wonderful journey, allowed me to bring several passions together, the work that I've done around equity and justice and community development and human services, but also just passion for trying to make sure I can give back in every way possible.

**Bill Campbell:**

I know you've been serving in Atlanta since 2007. What are some of the changes that you've seen in the community over that time, but maybe how the focus has changed at United Way, but also just how the community has developed over time?

**Milton Little:**

Atlanta is really a vibrant community. For many years it was a go-to destination for young professionals. Andrew Young once said Atlanta would be the most important American city in the 21st century. It's a global city. It's a city that seen a vibrant social scene. It's a capital of music and entertainment for so many people. It's now a foodie town in ways that were not the case many years ago. It's got tremendous virtues, but it's also got significant human service challenges that give United Way Greater Atlanta, unfortunately, plenty to do.

**Bill Campbell:**

Yeah, I've lived here for about 12 years now and I've definitely noticed those changes. So, actually during this year I'm seeing a lot of different United Way celebrate anniversaries and I know that United Way of Greater Atlanta will be turning 120 soon. Can you share with me, and I think you've worked at more than one United Way, but can you share with me the importance of the United Way movement?

**Milton Little:**

Yes, thank you for that question. Yes, this is my second United Way as a professional. I led the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, but in my earlier professional career had been a volunteer at the United Way in New York City. And so I've had a chance to see three United Ways up close. The basic DNA of the organizations as the same. The idea that local community people can come together and solve the community's most important and urgent human service challenges and do it in ways that speak to the unique capabilities, challenges and opportunities of an individual city. And so it's been wonderful and rewarding to be here and lead and we just get a chance to focus on how do we improve the life and wellbeing of children across Greater Atlanta. That's been our central mission since 2017.



**Bill Campbell:**

Yeah, it's interesting the focus around child wellbeing that Atlanta has taken up. I think over the years, different United Ways innovate in different ways. It's also interesting. I've worked at three different United Ways in my past. So just to highlight, because some people may not know this, but the 2 1 1, which is now a national program started in Atlanta and Atlanta's been known as an innovative United Way, and then now you've taken the time to map child wellbeing across Atlanta. And could you just share with me the importance of innovation in the social sector and how it drives your work today at United Way?

**Milton Little:**

Sure. This United Way will celebrate 120 years next year and throughout that 120 years, we have been an innovator in the human services space. The launch of one 2 1 1 as a dedicated phone number for information and referral for people in need to the services in the community that can respond to their needs. It's something we're incredibly proud of. We've celebrated a 30 plus year anniversary now. 2 1 1 is located in more than 40 states around the nation. That's one of our innovations, the innovation that we are proud of, that's the Child Wellbeing Index, the first of its kind to measure child wellbeing. When we launched down to the zip code today as we have revised it down to census tracts allows against 14 to 16 different indicators us to know how children are faring in the 13 counties of Greater Atlanta that we cover provides a way for us to target investments and engagement around the issues that affect kids and families at that geographic level of specificity. Things that we've done in the early learning space, things we've done in homelessness, how we've used data Fluxx's system and other capabilities are all part and parcel of our trying to constantly get better at our craft, take advantage of new and emerging technologies that can assist in every way possible our pursuit of mission.

**Bill Campbell:**

That's great to hear that. And I think sometimes when I'm talking with other United Ways across the country, you think about how are we going to make an impact? How are we going to measure success and how important data is to sort of the approach. I'm also curious when we think about data that it takes people to collect and report on that data and it took some of your leadership to guide a group of people to commit to something like child wellbeing. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of identifying child wellbeing a few years back to make that part of your goal? And then one thing that I think some people don't realize with how successful Atlanta is as a city is sort of the gap in upward mobility that can be there. So if you could talk a little bit about your process of identifying child wellbeing, getting the organization to move towards it, and then how focusing on that helps address this issue of upward.

**Milton Little:**

Yeah, it's a great story and I'd love to share it and it's got several layers to it. The first is that around 2012, 2013, some data began to emerge that basically said that suburbanization of poverty grew faster in Atlanta than any place else in the United States. It had grown at a rate of about 125% and helping people understand that while you might have associated poverty with the city of Atlanta, poverty was growing in the suburbs and places that were not used to the kind of issues that perhaps more urban areas were used to. It didn't have the well-defined and well-resourced human service network who could respond to those needs. That's one data point that I think basically shook our board. And then a couple of years later, as Raj Chetty from Harvard, who many of your listeners may be aware of, began to study and publicize the research around limited social mobility in cities across America. We began to have to



wrestle with the fact that on any given year, social mobility rates for poor children in Atlanta were either the worst or the second worst in the country.

So the board had to sit back and ask the question, have we've been making great investments. We're proud of the numbers of lives we've changed, we're proud of what we're able to do with specific agencies and the outcomes that those agencies can generate. But if on the most important measure how children are faring in our community, we're still at the bottom of the nation cities, then perhaps we need to reexamine both what we do and how we're measuring success. And that began the conversations around child wellbeing. And then I tasked one of my staff to give me some options for how we would measure child wellbeing. Santa Monica had a wellness index for the city. An I asked my colleague to take a look at that, take a look at some global indicators that were in cities around the world and create a model for what we would try here. And through a variety of steps and experimentation, we ultimately landed on the Child Wellbeing Index. That was both something people were excited about and something that scared the devil out of them. And I could say a little bit more about why it scared people if you'd like me to.

**Bill Campbell:**

Yeah, I would be really interested in why it scared people. The one thing that when I joined your organization I was impressed by was that you did not simply grade yourself on outputs. You did not simply grade yourself on what you could push out into the community, but you were putting yourself at a measure of multiple statistics that you didn't have control over, but that you knew were important to the children in the community you serve. And I thought that was brave. But in your experience, why were people scared of what they saw when you started to dig deeper on child wellbeing?

**Milton Little:**

Well, a couple of things, and it's sort of part of the larger set of challenges facing the United Way network. And that was we needed as a movement to go from measuring our success in terms of how big our fundraising campaigns were. Because nobody cared about how much money we raised, what people began to care about and what they began to clamor for was evidence that the money that was raised was being used to the highest and best purpose. And as more and more people were able to direct their gifts wherever they wanted in the world, United Ways had to redefine how they cast themselves as relevant to philanthropists in their local communities. And if you were going to measure yourself on impact, if you were going to set plant a flag in community and say, this is what we stand for and this is how you can hold us accountable for achieving our goals, that was new, different and scary. Because if you didn't meet the goal, people were worried about what price would donors exact because you were proving not able to accomplish what you were sitting out to do. And so while child wellbeing provided some audacious goals for us to pursue, it also provided a way in which people could hold us accountable and move to other organizations should they feel that we were unable to meet the goals we were setting for ourselves.

**Bill Campbell:**

And around that, I'll just say, can you share some of your success? Because I know it's really a community dialogue that you're having about how you're moving the needle, but do you want to share some of your success and how you've met some of those goals? And then we can pivot into talk a little more about United Way and some of the strategies they're implementing across the country.

**Milton Little:**



Sure. It's important to note that the Child Wellbeing Index was not a report card for United Way, but it was a report card for the community and a rallying cry and rallying post for the community. There were lots of organizations in the youth space doing great work measuring success very differently. And going back to what I said before about social mobility, if the aggregate impact for what we were doing was still not getting kids out of the bottom in terms of social mobility, how do we get the entire community of providers focused on a common set of goals? And it also provided us a roadmap to a common set of interventions that were research based and validated that if we pursued as a community, we'd be able to achieve some outcomes. And so shortly after we launched the Child Wellbeing Index in 2017, we began to see positive movement trending on issues related to educational outcomes, trending positively in the area of closing some income gaps, addressing some health disparities.

Things were riding pretty well and we were optimistic about the future. And then the pandemic hit and sort of set not only Atlanta back, but set lots of communities back as it related to whatever progress they were making on human service issues. So we've sort of now begun to see the community rebound from the pandemic. We identified some changes in the index that needed to be made because some of the measures no longer were relevant. And some things that we learned about in the pandemic around food insecurity, the importance of technology were proven to be more important than they were in 2017 when the index launched. So made some revisions, but we're seeing again, the beginning of some positive trending as it relates to early learning success and the improvements around kids reading on grade level at third grade.

**Bill Campbell:**

That's great. And I will say that other organizations in the community have adopted some of these metrics and have seen what the United Way has done in its leadership around understanding where child wellbeing is being well supported and where it needs more support. So I think that call to action was extremely valuable.

**Milton Little:**

What we've been heartened by, and to extend the point that you just made, is that there are a number of nonprofit organizations that have embraced it. They're utilizing it as their compass. A number of local foundations are using it to help define their strategies and geographic priorities. A number of companies have used it to help identify where they're going to cite workforce development programs or other community solutions. And so we continue to actively promote it and try to get more and more folks to embrace it. But from the very beginning, we wanted this to be a community resource tool and compass, and we're feeling pretty good that it's received important endorsement and the embrace of lots of important and leading human service organizations.

**Bill Campbell:**

And I would just encourage anyone listening to the podcast to go search out some information on the United Way of Greater Atlanta's website for more detail on child wellbeing and some of the statistics that they're following. And then switching to talk a little bit about kind of a National United Way movement. I've been talking with a handful of United Ways recently, and there seems to be a group that are moving more to direct service, which I find interesting considering it feels like the traditional United Ways were around funding organizations. One key strength in my time at different United Ways was their ability to be a convening partner in the community around key issues. You especially see this in response to disasters where sort of the backbone of the safety net that United Way provides is really



apparent. It feels like direct service versus partnership means that each United Way is making their own choices. How do you find the right mix between direct service and partnership?

**Milton Little:**

It's a challenge embedded in the larger issue affecting the United Way movement in individual United Ways around relevance. In today's world, the role of intermediary organizations are questioned, the value of intermediary organizations are questioned. Some believe that we're an administrative layer that's unnecessary. Some diminish the value of convening in favor of investments in direct service agencies, seeing that the numbers of children whose lives have been directly impacted by an agency service as more valuable than giving to an organization whose coin of the realm is being able to be a catalytic force or being able to aggregate impact or drive multiple organizations towards a common destination. And so that's the biggest issue, Bill, that is forcing all United Ways to test and learn what's going to be most valuable to their community. And so we've not embraced the idea that direct service is what's necessary here in Atlanta, but I don't challenge my colleagues who've done that, who I'm incredibly proud to support and be a champion now.

**Bill Campbell:**

Yeah, it's interesting because when I've talked with the different groups around the country, and when you look at 2 1 1, when you look at sort of innovations that we've talked about, sometimes taking the lead means that you might have to be a direct service provider for a temporary period with the idea of spinning off a project. But also the value of convening is just huge in the way of creating additional ROI on donations. And one example I'll share was I was out at a county council when I was at the United Way for Greater Atlanta, and it was a community of leaders that were talking about different projects and they identified a group of new students that came in the middle of the year who they didn't get the registered to get all the support that happens in the start of the year. And within that hour meeting, they went around the table because they had a police officer, they had a school teacher, they had a local charity, and they had the United Way there. And they were able to identify resources in the community that they could mobilize to get backpacks, to get food, to get even childcare to the community that had just joined their school system. And I was so amazed at that ability with no additional investment by the United Way to just convene the right people in a room to drive solutions. And I think it's really valuable and a key part of the United Way movement.

**Milton Little:**

It is one of our most potent value adds, and we work hard to communicate the value of that to people. And having said that though, there are a lot of folks whose they can say, I was a victim of cancer and I went to this agency and they helped solve my problem. Or I was challenged by homelessness and agency Y provided me housing. I mean, there's a level of passion that comes from having been a direct recipient of a service provided by an agency that's in that business that becomes the source of energy around how they decide who to support and what's important as part of their philanthropic array of priorities and United Ways that don't provide those services, that are not the places where you're going to see children convening, where you're not going to see the direct beneficiaries. Many donors question the role, and again, goes back to the point I made earlier about relevance and impact. And so we as a network have to continue to push against the challenge that's posed by our being an intermediary organization in a philanthropic and human service transaction.

**Bill Campbell:**



So just to lean in a little bit to your thought leadership in the last few years, I wanted to talk about a project you participated a few years back in a documentary called Uncharitable, which I believe is part of a Dan Palotta's work around judging nonprofits around overhead versus the ability to actually achieve their mission.

**Milton Little:**

Yes.

**Bill Campbell:**

Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with that and what your experience was like.

**Milton Little:**

So I got to meet Dan when a group of us invited him to come to Atlanta. Shortly after he became, well-known for the YouTube, excuse me, the TED talk that he did when he launched the book. And we became fast friends and stayed connected together in this work. Dan launched an organization called the Charitable Defense Fund, and I was an inaugural board member. And so the relationship, again, was both personal and professional. And then one day he called me and said, I'm getting some people I know and care about kicking some ideas around and filming these conversations. So fly up to DC and we'll have a good chat. And then a few years later after we did that, he called me up and he said, I'm taking all those conversation. I'm turning them into a movie, and so I need you to be in it. So I'd said, of course. And so that's our journey. But I think what's most important about what Dan has done is forced the conversation around the relevance of how we measure impact and the challenges that looking only at overhead ratios poses to our ability to really accomplish the missions of social chains that nonprofits are in the business of. And Dan has detractors and he has passionate advocates, but what's most important is he's forced a conversation that we need to have that I think has only been a fruitful endeavor.

**Bill Campbell:**

No, that's great. I often will challenge people in the private sector to say that what you've asked someone to do is to change the world with less money, less resource, and with volunteers. And yes, you can do that, but perhaps you might want to think if you really want to change the world, it does take an investment. And from that movie, I remember hearing people talking about that I'm competing in the marketplace for employees against private sector employers, so I do need the resources to accomplish the really important work that we're doing.

**Milton Little:**

The other thing that, yes, it has done all those things, and what I have been saying over the last couple of years to many folks who I've had a conversation with around overhead, it's like going to buy an airplane ticket and saying to the airline personnel, I don't want the money that I'm giving you for this ticket to pay for anything other than fuel. I don't want it to pay for the pilot. I don't want it to pay for the tires. I don't want it to pay for the flight attendants. And everyone looks at me and says the airline would not be able to operate. But we're faced with donors saying, I don't want any money to go to the staff who are designing the programs that I'm here to support. I don't want any money going to overhead. And back to the Charity Defense Fund, the motto that was on our shirts said, I am overhead. And it's people who run the programs, design them, who evaluate them, who make the case for donor support, who many folks feel are extraneous to community solutions. And so Dan's just raising this issue and making folks confront it. Think about it as they make their own charitable decisions.



**Bill Campbell:**

Well, thank you Milton for that. As we wrap up today, I want to give you some time to share if there's an issue that you're passionate about or something that's on your mind recently. It could be about United Way, it could be about the men of Morehouse, your alma mater or something from your personal life. Thank you for the conversation today. And what would you like to leave us with as we wrap up the podcast?

**Milton Little:**

Thank you, Bill. It's been a pleasure to be back connected with you. In a world in which people are wrestling with purpose and trying to find purpose. I just think about how fortunate I'm that I bring purpose to this work. I know how fortunate I've been, yet every day I could drive down the street and see people who look like me that are without an unfettered pathway towards a thriving adulthood and success. And I just be just reminded in the faces of people that I see every day that I got more work to do, that I can't simply just be happy for my own success, that I need to feel obligated to do for others what lots of people did for me that have enabled me to be in the positions that I've been in. And Morehouse was an important place for that and growing up, and the church, my parents and all of that. So I didn't get all these gifts just to shower them on myself. I got them to share with others, and that's why I'm committed to doing what I do.

**Bill Campbell:**

That's great. Well, Milton, thank you so much for your time, and thank you for sharing those thoughts. And yes, I encourage everyone to check out not only the child wellbeing work that United Way for Greater Atlanta is doing, but also the other work that they're doing in the community. You can find them at [unitedwayatlanta.org](http://unitedwayatlanta.org). Please follow the work of Milton and the United Way and stay connected with us for more stories. Until next time, take care and keep making a difference.