



Bill Campbell:

Hello and welcome to Coffee, Tea, & 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, & 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 and friend, Zack Rosenberg, a principal at The Colby Group focused on building successful ESG impact strategies for organizations and corporations as they undertake strategic change. I first met Zack as the founder of the St. Bernard Project, which has since rebranded as SBP and went from an organization focused on recovery in New Orleans, to responding to disasters nationwide. Well, welcome, Zack. It is great to see you again. I know we met both during our time in New Orleans, and so I'm really excited to speak with you today. Let's dive right in. Coffee or tea? What's your go-to?

Zack Rosenberg:

Coffee,.

Bill Campbell:

Coffee. Milk and sugar or just black?

Zack Rosenberg:

I've evolved into an almond milk guy.

Bill Campbell:

Oh, good, good. I try that every couple months and I go back to regular milk, but yeah, I like it. Well, awesome. So let's sort of talk a little bit about the beginning. Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you were doing before you started SBP or St. Bernard Project and what led you to that.

Zack Rosenberg:

Sure. Thanks Bill, and it is really terrific to be reconnected. Those early days post Katrina were truly singular and you and an army of other people we're so committed to making the world work better for more people. So sincere, thanks, and I'm thrilled we are reconnected. Before Katrina, I was a trial lawyer in Washington, DC doing what I always wanted to do. I had this grand plan that I'd be an indigent defense lawyer until I was 50, and then I'd be a high school principal and I'd royally screwed up that plan. But life was working pretty well. My wife and I were together back then. Her folks lived nearby in DC and we were both doing work that was really meaningful. Katrina happened and so many other folks, we wrote a check. We were just astounding to see on the news. People enduring what, at least from far we thought they were enduring. We thought we had a grip on how bad it was. We sent a check.

Bill Campbell:

Yeah, it's interesting. I often think about your organization starting up and actually to prepare for this. I purchased your Getting Home book and started reading through it and just some of the stories and the memories. If you could share some of your personal experiences when you arrived and what it was like



in the initial part. And then of course, I always think about the connection to United Way, but also our friend Rodney Bro and his support being someone from St. Bernard Parish. Part of his personal story was getting people back into St. Bernard and then maybe what you recounted in the book, and I remember you used to tell this to people at the United Way and to the corporations we went and met with was about, I think it's Andre and his journey, but just share some of your personal stories. I know it's inspiring and it can inspire people to build organizations.

Zack Rosenberg:

Sure. And interrupt or fast forward Bill as you see appropriate. So after sending some money, the world conspired so that it made sense for Liz and I to go down there for two weeks. Liz was transitioning to a new job. I had finished a really important case where my client was accused of a pretty massive crime that would've put him in jail for the rest of his life, and he was both innocent and eventually found not guilty. So I wanted to do anything besides wake up and go to bed thinking of this guy. So we went to New Orleans to help for two weeks. It was six months after the storm and before going, Liz sent emails to about 30 groups saying, Hey, we want to come down and help. We heard from one, there were a bunch of hippies who were feeding people in a parking lot and they were funded by the United Way. And so we thought, all right, we'll go. Maybe we missed it. It's America. Disasters happens. Back then, oil was on people's minds. Third of the country's oil was rolling through Louisiana, and so we took the fact that we didn't hear from anyone as a proxy for it was over.

And when we got there, it was far from over. We saw people living in attics, in cars, in garages, and there were cars on top of houses, houses on top of cars, boats, on top of everything, miles inland. But was most striking for us was the fact that largely these were people who had achieved that notion of American success. They owned homes and we had thought, I had done a fair amount of poverty work, and we had thought that, all right, you work hard, you buy a house, things can only get but so bad. And these folks were staring into the abyss of uncertainty. I remember this guy, Bob Burris, he was Korean War veteran. He got shot, he was a New Orleans cop. He came upon a robber and he told the guy to put his gun down and Bob ended up putting his gun down. He got shot. These were people who had lived through a lot and they were absolutely at their breaking point, staring into this abyss of uncertainty. Bob was living in his attic, having no idea when they were going to move home. So it was really a striking time for us.

Bill Campbell:

It's interesting when you mentioned that because I went down probably that first Mardi Gras after Katrina, and my friends will tease me. I'm the only person that went to Mardi Gras and got a job to work at that United Way. But the image of you've never seen mold of so many different colors as it crawled up the walls of a house, you've seen the floors buckling like an ocean wave, and you're seeing piles of debris in the neutral ground in the middle that are way above your maybe two stories high in some places, and then you're still seeing people who are wanting to find a way to come back. And then seeing people come, the recipients locally, were so surprised people would come to respond. When I moved there, there was always this response of, oh, I can't believe you moved here after the storm.

And so just thinking about you guys are coming there, you're seeing this need. You're seeing the gap in response, which at least was thought of to be common. It was thought, of course there's going to be a gap in response, and I often talk about that when I talk about disaster relief that these things happen like six weeks, six months, six years. It feels like there's a way to close those in and make them happen. I think one of the interesting things that I want to get to is to talk about how you guys work at SVB to close that gap, but can you tell me a little bit about the importance of volunteers as well as the



limitation of volunteers, which were so key, not only in welcoming you to New Orleans, but also starting St. Bernard Project?

Zack Rosenberg:

Yeah, thanks, Bill. So after we got there, we slept in tents, feeding people with the hippies. Food was great, a lot of beans. It was great and it was beautiful. There were people from all around the world who had no ties to New Orleans or St. Bernard besides shared humanity. It was beautiful. It was humanity at its best. And after two weeks, we got to know the people, Bob, Mr. Andre, Don Nunez, all these wonderful people, super well, and we knew all they wanted to do was come home. And we went to the bigger groups and we said, we thought we didn't know anything about disaster work or building or any of that kind of stuff. We were client people certainly. And we asked the big groups. We said, when are you going to start the building? And it was almost like everyone was on script, Bill. He said, we've done disaster recovery the same way for 30 years. Building is the third phase, and you can't build until you do these two other phases.

And we thought, that's nuts. If this was our family, we wouldn't want to follow some process. We'd want them to move home right away. And it felt like the worst bureaucracy is a self-imposed artificial bureaucracy. And to our 32-year-old, candidly, pretty entitled selves, we thought that was something we couldn't buy, abide rather. And we couldn't tell Mr. Andre, good to know you. Good luck. Have a nice life. And so we kind of thought, go pound Sandy, all we'll figure this out. And so we moved because we just couldn't accept that people were told, wait, we're not at that phase yet. And so Bill, you asked about volunteers, and this was the Craigslist days. I don't know if Craigslist still exists, but it was a massive engine. And so we moved, we got this gutted out former appliance repair store whose rent slash lent it to us, this guy named Frank White who taught us certainly about construction, but also about the world and even more so about his community. And we put up an ad on Craigslist, and it was like the field of dreams. People came to help because they too couldn't abide seeing human beings staring into this abyss of uncertainty, being so close to being pushed beyond the breaking point.

Bill Campbell:

And this is a common theme actually in some of the conversations we've had. Whereas if you think about the enormity of a problem, you sometimes freeze. But if you think about just doing something, the small act of making an announcement and call for volunteering frees you up to then have a resource to make a response. We had another example of someone just gathering together all the resources that people would need to become citizens and make that available to people. So just calling for volunteers, and I always like to call those things out as people think about pursuing a life in nonprofit or wanting to right a wrong doesn't have to be a huge thing that you start with.

Zack Rosenberg:

Yeah, there's a couple really interesting points there, Bill. Thanks for sharing it. When there's an intolerable situation that you can't abide, folks often think, well, it's too big. Or they think, I'm a teacher, I'm a lawyer, I'm a doctor, I'm a business person. Let's think about that for a second. If it was something that the kind of insiders would solve, they would've done it. Sometimes it takes outside innovative thinking. And so the best thing that Liz and I had was no ties to the traditional disaster recovery apparatus. We weren't going to hurt anyone's feelings. We didn't care about anyone's feelings. We didn't know anyone. All we cared about was clients and we weren't, our mind wasn't shaped by the really well-intended, but eventually outdated view on disaster recovery. And so to the extent you're calling out important themes, one theme is it's never too big. You can always do something. Second,



don't decide because it's not your industry. You can't fix it. Outsiders are the ones who drive change, I believe.

Bill Campbell:

And I can vouch for the passion that Zack had because my job was to go do fundraising in different established businesses and I would bring him into the room and I always got little nervous because he would bring that passion, which would make people want to donate, but he would also bring the passion and hold people to a little bit of account as you were telling that story. So you were the most effective tool as a fundraiser, but a little risky as well. So going along the lines around partnership and collaboration and thinking about how you were supported, just calling out how you changed to become more efficient and how your partnership with Toyota helped bring about that transformation.

Zack Rosenberg:

Yeah, let me tell you about one other partnership first Bill. So United Way pumped in some money. Gary Ostroske, a dear friend out of both of us, and frankly I think he did it because there weren't any other options. Real leadership isn't certainty. Leadership sometimes can be courage enough to take a chance, and Gary took a chance on us. You all did. Eventually we got to a point where we didn't have enough tools. We had 50 volunteers a day, a hundred volunteers a day, and we had clients as far as the eye could see. And so we went to Habitat for Humanity, and this was really formative for us, an ostensible competitor and their CEO guy named Jim Pate, who...

Bill Campbell:

I know Jim.

Zack Rosenberg:

I couldn't have more respect for. And his partner, Elizabeth. Rather than seeing us a threat, this new nonprofit group, they said, you have volunteers, you have clients. Well, we have tools. And it was almost biblical. They gave us 30 drills, 30 skill saws and a bunch of drywall tools. And that's what we needed to get up to scale. And so at every step of the way, there's been partnerships that have been client centered that have moved us along. And I'm really proud, like that initial investment from Jim and Habitat is a direct link to SVP turning into a funder and eventually funding other nonprofit groups like Habitats and smaller rebuilding groups across the country. A really important theme is we've got to make sure that we see the work not from a parochial territorial perspective, but instead as a client-centered perspective, what's best for the client? And I think if NGO leaders can ask that question to themselves, it's going to inexorably lead them maybe to a different or more uncomfortable answer than they were expecting, but certainly the right one.

Bill Campbell:

And the question of who's the customer? Is it the donor or is it the end recipient? And which one is going to actually help you move the needle on the issue?

Zack Rosenberg:

And we can go deeper. Is it the donor, is it the end recipient, is it the staff, is it the board, or is it the client? And when I was at SBP, Liz and I are thrilled with the new leadership there. When we were there, we were really proud that I think we did a good job with the team of always focusing on what would the client want? However, inconvenient for us, if it was our loved one, what would that indicate us that we



need to be doing? And that's what led us to the Toyota production system. SBP started working with Toyota two or three years in, and it was a time when we had gotten a ton of recognition. Liz was the CNN Hero of the Year at that point. We're on the cover of US News and World Report raising a ton of money, but we had plateaued.

SBP had plateaued at the amount of houses that could be built that we could build. And we met this life-changing woman, Pat Pineda, who ran their foundation. And instead of asking Pat for money, we asked her to teach us to build houses the way they build cars. Long story short, in about nine months and with the team showing tremendous flexibility because remember we run thought they were on top, the team reduced construction time by 48% from 121 days to 60 something days per house. And SBP adopted the Toyota production system really as, oh my goodness, the white kitty is here.

Bill Campbell:

You have the cat in the background. That's fine.

Zack Rosenberg:

We do. I'm going to text Liz to come get the cat. Sorry. That's alright. And so we had reduced construction time by 48%, but as importantly, SBP embraced the Toyota production system throughout all operations, development, fundraising comms, processes, and that led SBP to be even more client centered. And today without even when Liz and I are on our next chapter, the team there with tremendous leadership is tightening the grace abrasive TPS still today from a client-centered perspective.

Bill Campbell:

Very cool. And then to be that level of, you think about volunteering to be at the level of smart offerings, and it takes a lot of work to take a system like that on their side and to implement it at your nonprofit, the work that you did, but also the commitment goal to give you something that really meets the need. Sometimes I think it's understanding how you can use a volunteer and the commitment from the volunteer. There's a level of communication there that is special in that partnership.

Zack Rosenberg:

Yeah, absolutely. And so, sorry, White Kitty is going to go upstairs now. There you go. White Kitty was born in Chalmette in a FEMA trailer 18 years ago.

Bill Campbell:

Wow. Well, she should have stayed.

Zack Rosenberg:

No, she's happy with us. Yeah. I'll tell you, Bill, this is at various times in my life in the last 18 or so years, normal to get down about future hope. Where's the country going? Are we connected in? Anyone who's concerned about any of that can really look to volunteering after disasters. When I started this work, I was a relatively cynical criminal defense lawyer, and then we opened up SBP and we advertised for volunteers. And there was no American demographic that was not represented. No one ever asked, well, I'm thinking of coming, but how do your clients vote? How do they feel about this social issue? They merely said, do you need us? We're coming. They'd say, make one promise, make sure we're busy and our work is meaningful. And so I can tell you 18 years of lived experience that Americans are really



connected to each other when you strip away everything but immediate need. And when that's the case, it's tough to hold that commitment to each other back. And I witnessed it.

Bill Campbell:

Well, Zack, on that note, if we could have just one more question and then we'll wrap up our time together. Thank you so much for sharing your story, sharing the process, and then giving us that hopeful message. But do you want to talk a little bit about what you're focused on now and then the work that you're doing now, now that you're still involved a little bit with SBP, but now you've handed over to a great team of leadership there. Just tell me a little bit about what you're doing now and then we can wrap up our time together.

Zack Rosenberg:

Yeah, thanks. So a little more on SBP because they're doing a great job. After SBP moved from being only a direct service organization, which was so important, rebuilding houses for people impacted by disaster, and there was an inflection point where we came to really scrutinize is the answer, only more band-aids? If we love our clients. Back to that question Bill we talked about before, if we really care about our clients, what would they want? And what they'd want is to never need a group like SBP or any other rebuilding group in the first place. They'd want resilient homes that want good insurance that they could navigate, that want access to federal funds, and if they needed nonprofit groups that want it to be easy, effective and to be treated humanely. And so I'm really proud that in the five to seven years before we left, SBP transitioned to a system change organization and it transitioned to a scaled impact organization focusing always on rebuilding, but on raising capacity in the industry, on funding other organizations, on sharing best practices, and then working very collaboratively with other organizations and the federal government so the system worked better in the first place. And at that point, 17, 18 years in, it was a good launching point for us. The leadership team that we had, people at SBP who were there for 10, 11, 12, 13 years. It's their time to shine. And so Liz and I have moved on and we're now running an entity called the Colby Group, which is a philanthropic advising, nonprofit consulting and coaching organization that works with foundations, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and leaders who are fiercely committed to driving impact. We loved doing that work in one industry for so long, but at this point in our life with so much need out there, we thought we can best serve by broadening our impact and supporting other organizations and causes that are dearly important to all of us. And so it, it's a fun port, meaningful portfolio life. I have clients doing immigration work, criminal defense work, some disaster recovery work. I'm working with a couple for-profit startups and at the end of the day, it's about building leaders, creating hope, seeing possibility, reducing fear, and leaning in to solve problems at the end of the day, treating others the way we'd want and clients and those who will be served the way we'd want, our own loved ones to be treated.

Bill Campbell:

Awesome. I know I've always appreciated your voice on these matters, and I hope people listening have appreciated what you shared. And it's actually very similar to why I like working at Fluxx, because I get to talk with people who are trying to make change. So I stay connected to what I did before a nonprofit advising people on software, but also connecting with them about their work. So I'm really glad to hear that you're lending your unique perspective to these organizations that are looking to be change makers and to make a difference in the communities they're serving. Zack, thank you so much for your time.

Zack Rosenberg:



Great to be with you. Thanks, Bill.

Bill Campbell:

To our listeners, thank you for tuning in. Be sure to follow the work of SBP and please consider supporting their work www.sbpusa.org and stay connected with us for more inspiring stories about the organizations who are doing work on the ground. Until next time, take care and keep making a difference.