

**Transcript – Ways & Means Podcast— S5E3**

Emily Hanford: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. We share bright ideas for how to improve society. I'm Emily Hanford.

**Carolyn - When I graduated from high school, I remember thinking, man, every part of my life has been touched by the welfare state.**

Carolyn Barnes grew up in poverty. Her family stood in line at church pantries and clothing closets. They received food stamps.

**Carolyn: I remember sitting on the floor of the local Department of Social Services, which would be called the welfare office, as a child and as an adolescent. So, I knew that we were incredibly reliant on safety net programs to make our lives work and a lot of times it didn't work very well.**

Her dad was disabled and the family got by relying on his social security check. Then, when Carolyn was a teenager, her father died.

**Carolyn: With his death went the Social Security disability insurance, which my mother used to pay rent. So, when that was gone and she wasn't able to earn enough on her job, we lost our apartment and it ended up being a very long-- a long journey of homelessness and just incredible need.**

What Carolyn remembers about this time in her life is how shameful and disempowering it was. Her family needed public assistance programs, but her experience with those programs was mostly negative.

Fast forward a few years and now Carolyn was in college. It was the summer after her sophomore year. Her family was homeless again and she had gotten a job in the college library so she could keep living in her dorm.

One day she was re-shelving books and came across one that included interviews with people on welfare and how they felt about it. These are actors reading passages from the book.

**VOICE ACTORS:**

**Phil: "So I started going on welfare around 6 years ago. And, you know, at first I thoroughly resisted applying for social-welfare programs because I didn't feel right about that. I was brought up in a typical working-class household, and everybody worked for a living."**

**Sandra: "I was afraid. They give you food stamps and then you walk into the store and you're in line, and people all look at you like 'What are you doing with food stamps? You're in good health. Why don't you go out and work?'"**

Carolyn was reading this and thinking, "Wow." Here in the library is a book describing the experience of growing up in poverty. Written by a person with a PhD.

**Carolyn: I took it to a mentor of mine. And I asked her, I said, “You know, can people really study poverty?” She said, “Yeah.” So I said, “I think I want to study poverty.” That was like transformative for me. Like I didn’t know people studied this and I think I want to study this, I want to know why these programs are the way they are and how we can make them better and hopefully not become a cynic in the process.**

And that’s what she does now at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

**Carolyn: I guess my goal as a researcher is to figure out how the state can better serve families. These programs don't have to be demeaning.**

This is important because research that shows if people *do* have negative experiences with government programs, they may actually be less likely to be involved in their communities.

They are less likely to be politically engaged, too.

**Carolyn: So, whether people vote, whether people are calling their elected officials and, advocating for themselves and their needs.**

When people “turn off” researchers call it “demobilization.” But, Carolyn Barnes says it doesn’t have to be this way. Her research shows it could be the opposite.

She studied a few public programs for families in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago. The people who relied on these programs were dealing with crime, hopelessness, and even fear. And her research showed that the public programs they relied on actually helped contribute to “demobilization.”

But in other programs she studied, she found that the more time people spent with the program, the more involved they got in their communities.

**Carolyn: So, I wanted to figure out what the secret sauce is. What are those aspects that's creating this opportunity for political empowerment?**

(Music)

Coming up on this episode of Ways & Means: research into how government-funded programs for poor families can foster political involvement. Specifically, we’re taking a look at the connection between afterschool programs for kids and politically involved parents.

#### **UNDERWRITING**

**This season of Ways & Means is supported by Polis: the Center for Politics at Duke University’s Sanford School of Public Policy. I’m Deondra Rose, Director of Research for Polis. We prepare future political leaders and foster innovative scholarship related to the most pressing political issues of our time. Find out more at polis-dot-duke-dot-edu.**

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Recently Carolyn Barnes has been focusing on government-funded afterschool programs that target low-income families like the one she grew up in.

**Crystal Avent: Right now the students are transitioned to go home, and the other students will be going to our afterschool program. (Hi, how are you?)**

Programs like this one in Durham, NC are designed to give children a supportive afterschool environment. Everyday there's homework help, a snack, and supervised activities.

**Afterschool teacher: We're going to do a campfire, out in the pit...(cheering). (fade out)**

Parents are welcome to pop in and join the activities at any time. Estella Sayec [*Say*] has come to sit at the campfire with her daughter. Estella is a housekeeper at a nearby hospital. She says she feels very connected to the program staff.

**Estella: They know me, they know my kid. The moment they see me: "Oh, you're Francis' mom." I mean, that feels good, that people know you and then recognize you and know who you are. It's a big thing.**

Estella says she is just as comfortable here in the program as her daughter is. And that's really important, not just for academic achievement for her daughter. In fact, *Estella's* comfort in the program might have a broader impact.

This is what Carolyn Barnes' work is all about. She spent two years with three different afterschool programs as case studies to find out how they serve families.

All three afterschool programs support low-income families in Chicago, but each one operates differently. And Carolyn found that when afterschool programs are designed to engage parents, they can actually help mobilize parents like Estella to become more involved in their communities.

One of the programs Carolyn studied was more focused on parents than the other programs, and it showed.

**Carolyn: I remember I was sitting with this mother of five and she told this story about how her interactions with staff and the positive impact of the program on the community had given her hope for her neighborhood; hope that she never had before and it inspired her to do community work.**

The mom told Carolyn about the community cleanups she organized with her neighbors. These were not cleanups the *program* was organizing. These were cleanups the mom was arranging herself... in a low-income neighborhood, with a lot of crime. And she didn't stop with just organizing trash pickups.

**Carolyn: She got to working with neighborhood children and creating a book club through the library. She gave me this real elaborate story about how it changed the way she viewed her community and her capacity to change her community. Um, wow. (laughter) This is not how we typically think about programs that target low-income families.**

The longer Carolyn Barnes researched this program, the more curious she became. She kept meeting people like this mother of five. People who were investing time and effort in their communities.

(Music)

**Marcie: It's just a beautiful neighborhood. I feel like it kind of gets a bad name in the news a lot because we do struggle with crime and we do have some open drug markets.**

Marcie Curry is a staffer at a program called Breakthrough. The program is located in a low-income neighborhood called East Garfield Park in Chicago, and they have a track record of doing the kind of thing Carolyn Barnes is talking about.

Breakthrough is a faith-based organization, and they receive significant government funding for their programs. They offer a wide range of services to the community. They have 200 children in their afterschool program. They also have programs for adults, like helping with housing and jobs. The family programs are run out of a big building called the FamilyPlex that has classrooms, a café and a gym.

One of their main goals is connecting with parents, and having parents connect with each other.

**Marcie: One of the problems really in urban communities is isolation. And when you have a place in a community like East Garfield Park, where parents who are working really hard to make sure that they provide the best for their children. When they can meet each other in a place like Breakthrough, and they can connect really not because of programs, but just because of a shared space, really great things can happen. Great friendships can be formed that wouldn't have been formed otherwise.**

And Marcie Curry says, often those friendships do turn into civic and political action. Take Brenda Taylor.

When Brenda moved to East Garfield Park, her husband had just lost his job and she had just started college, so money was tight. She was worried about afterschool and summer care for her three kids.

**Brenda: I really felt like my hands were tied. The park district was so expensive. I just felt like there were no there were no options for me as a parent.**

Brenda heard about Breakthrough's programs for kids when she was chatting with the crossing guard and another parent.

**Brenda: And they asked me if I was new to the community. I said yes. And just out of the blue, the parent started telling me about Breakthrough. She started telling me about how they have summer programs. They have after school programs. They have this huge dinner at the end of the year. I'm like, wow.**

Brenda went to visit Breakthrough – and immediately felt welcomed.

**Brenda: And they're like, oh, well, we have opportunities that you can come and volunteer. We love to have, you know, parents involved. And I'm like, absolutely. Tell me where to jump in.**

Brenda remembers the exact moment when her volunteerism turned into civic action. She was chaperoning a Breakthrough field trip. It was a chance for kids to meet a local elected official. In Chicago, they are called aldermen.

At the time, Brenda was frustrated with some issues in her neighborhood. There were lots of people just hanging out, spontaneous block parties on the street.

**Brenda: If we were coming home in the evenings, or sometimes at night, we couldn't even get on the block because they were like, they would have the street blocked off or people would just be standing in the street and it got to be so frustrating**

She's thinking about all this as the kids were talking to the alderman. And pretty soon her hand went up.

**Brenda: And I explained to the alderman, I said, you know, this is frustrating for hardworking people who live on this block, that they can't even come home in the evenings from work to relax because of whatever mayhem is going on in this corner. And I said, if you are looking for us to vote for you in the next election, we need you to do something about this mayhem.**

Brenda says she had never spoken up in public like this before... certainly not in a meeting with an elected official.

**Brenda: No. Never. Never. I was – I – I've never felt like that was an OK thing to do. I know it sounds so weird (chuckling), but I just know I just never felt comfortable or even confident enough that my concerns would matter to someone. So I never – I never spoke up about anything.**

After the meeting, Brenda kept calling her alderman.

**Brenda: I would just kind of stay on him and eventually he increased the police activity on the block to the point where the mayhem just kind of stopped.**

Professor Carolyn Barnes argues that Brenda spoke up that day because of her connection with Breakthrough. The program helped her find her voice.

(Music)

Duke professor Carolyn Barnes says some programs – like two of the afterschool programs that she studied – are quite different than Breakthrough.

Those programs perceive the surrounding community as dangerous, and so they focus on creating a safe haven for kids – essentially keeping the kids in and the neighborhood out. In doing so, they don't make much of an effort to engage their neighbors.

But other programs like Breakthrough take a different approach. Carolyn says these programs view the very same neighborhood as an opportunity for transformation, and they regard themselves as a catalyst for neighborhood change.

(Music)

So...this brings us back to Carolyn Barnes' initial mission.

**Carolyn: I wanted to figure out what the secret sauce is. [repeats, with an echo...] "Secret sauce is, secret sauce is..."**

Carolyn started this whole project trying to figure out: Why do some government-funded afterschool programs for low-income kids lead to civic and political engagement in parents?

**Carolyn: What are those aspects that's creating this opportunity for political empowerment?**

Here's what she's come up with.

Carolyn Barnes argues that programs like Breakthrough – at their core – are effective because of a secret sauce with three ingredients.

The first ingredient is simple, and one that many programs already do. Programs should treat parents with care and respect.

**Carolyn: It's a policy that incentivizes what I call good bureaucratic behavior. Good behavior from staff towards parents.**

Afterschool programs need to set a tone: the afterschool program cares as much about the parents as they do about the kids.

Breakthrough has specific guidance for all staff members on how to do this. They explicitly teach staff how to build rapport with families. They train staff members to look out for pivotal moments, turning-point moments, when parents express need, and staff can help meet that need. Moments like that form trust.

Brenda Taylor is the Breakthrough parent we heard from earlier. She didn't know Breakthrough had a policy for how staff should treat parents, but she felt the effects of that policy from the first time she walked in the door.

**Brenda: So to find this place and not only to find it, but to find that these people were so incredibly loving and friendly was a breath of fresh air. It really was.**

The second ingredient in this secret sauce is this: the program should see itself as a catalyst for change. The program should engage the community, not retreat and stay behind closed doors.

**Carolyn: If you are positioning yourself as an organization or program that wants to engage the community, you're providing opportunities for parents to engage the community as well.**

That's why Marcie Curry and her colleagues at Breakthrough focus so much on connecting people who live in the neighborhood with each other.

**Marcie: Even our cafe is called the Bridge Cafe because we really feel passionate about connecting people. And I just, that's why I come to work every day. When I can see people connect with one another and get support from one another, it's really a pretty magical thing.**

The third ingredient, and a really critical one according to Carolyn Barnes is this: give parents opportunities – specifically invite them – to participate in authentic ways in the afterschool program. This is like the salt of the recipe. The meal's not the same if you leave it out.

**Carolyn: So if there is an opportunity for me to volunteer, if there's an opportunity for me to lead in any capacity, that matters. If there is an opportunity for me to work at the after-school program or the broader agency that's implementing the after school program, that matters.**

Carolyn says this step isn't done properly the secret sauce can be spoiled – and the parents in programs that don't get this step right will be far less engaged.

She cites the story of one afterschool program she studied, a school she calls "Jackson Elementary." Like the other two programs, Jackson was based in a low-income neighborhood in Chicago,

On paper, Jackson seemed to offer the *most* opportunity for parent involvement. Even so, Carolyn found that not many parents were actually involved.

Staff didn't broadcast the volunteer opportunities widely, and most parents at Jackson Elementary told Carolyn that they were unaware of volunteer and leadership opportunities and hadn't been asked to participate.

And, Carolyn's in-depth interviews showed parents at Jackson were politically apathetic, even cynical. They did not hold positive views of the neighborhood, and they weren't confident in their ability to bring about neighborhood change. Many expressed a desire to move away from the neighborhood.

In comparison, there's Breakthrough. Parents can be involved there in many different, meaningful ways. Parent Brenda Taylor said she moved through a wide variety of volunteer roles over the years.

**Brenda: I would just help wherever, however. I love being involved. I love the kids. It's what I would refer to as organized chaos. It was just it was so much fun to be there.**

Brenda continues to volunteer at Breakthrough, even though her kids have aged out of the afterschool program. One of her favorites positions is as a staffer at the annual Christmas Store, where families can shop for deeply discounted gifts. Roles like this offer what Carolyn Barnes calls "hidden lessons" of

political participation. She heard from many parents like Brenda who – because of their volunteerism, learned to speak up, and advocate on behalf of the community.

**Carolyn: So they could tell me, “I learned how to write a letter to my alderman through my role as the leader of the women's support group at the after-school program. And now I'm able to not only write a letter to my alderman, but I can write a letter to my state rep. I can use these skills to communicate the issues and concerns that I have as a parent in this community and to advocate for my family.”**

In Brenda’s case, the volunteer opportunities, her community experiences with Breakthrough and her personal relationships with Breakthrough’s staff, all led to the day where Brenda felt comfortable enough to speak up at that public meeting with her alderman. And to keep speaking up until things changed.

**Brenda: And it's kind of given me a level of courage to say, hey, you know what? This is my community as well. I can stand up as well. I can fight for this as well.**

(Music)

And this, Carolyn Barnes says, is the secret sauce for how afterschool programs can be designed to nurture politically engaged parent.

**Carolyn: So if you have all three of those:**

One

**Carolyn: You have policy that says treat people nicely, treat parents nicely, engage families.**

Two

**Carolyn: An organization that's interested in being outward facing and engaging communities.**

And three

**Carolyn: Policy that encourages parental involvement, roles and opportunities. You really create opportunities for parents to become politically empowered.**

And – Carolyn Barnes argues -- this secret sauce could be exported to other government programs, and real change could happen.

**Carolyn: So if we could build that in to other public assistance programs, we would potentially be positively impacting a lot of families.**

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Ways & Means is a production of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Carolyn Barnes is a faculty member at Sanford. Her book about this research is called “State of Empowerment.” She was recently selected for the prestigious 2019 William T. Grant Scholars Award for early career researchers.

We will have a link to her book at our website, [ways-and-means-show-dot-org](http://ways-and-means-show-dot-org).

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Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Karen Kemp and Alison Jones. Our associate producers are Hunter Stark and Matt Majsak (MAY-jack). Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans.

Artwork by Rae Hsu [Shoe].

And if you’re enjoying this series of stories, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. And tell a friends and colleagues about us. Thanks so much for joining me, I’m Emily Hanford.