

## Episode 5 Transcript: Developing Deep and Lasting University-Community Partnerships

### Hedy Walls

We are engaging, we are working, we're talking with people. We are working together. That is real, authentic community engagement.

### Makeda Zulu

Welcome to Rules of Engagement, a show that highlights the projects and partnerships of the University of Minnesota Robert J. Jones Urban Research, Outreach and Engagement Center. I'm your host. Makeda Zulu. In today's episode, we will talk with Assistant Professor Doug Kennedy of the Integrative Health and Wellbeing Research Program and Hedy Walls, Executive Vice President of Social Responsibility for the YMCA of the North.

It is so good to have you both here today. You all are doing great work, and the folks are going to get a chance to hear about how you all met and what your separate goals are and then how you're working together. So if you can start by telling us a little bit about yourself, share identities, experience and all that is important for you to share.

And I am being signaled that, Hedy, you are going first.

### Hedy Walls

Well, thank you and it is a pleasure to be here this afternoon. I am Hedy Lamar Walls the Executive Vice President of Social Responsibility for the YMCA of the North. I have the pleasure of leading the work of the Y of the North in relationship to the community engagement, health and wellness, and really looking at social responsibility through multiple lens that are inclusive of equity as well as diversity and inclusion. That work provides opportunities for our community to be engaged fully and really understanding their needs, what they like, what they dislike, how do we contribute to the successes that they choose to have as they continue on their journey?

The programs under the social responsibility area are inclusive of veterans. The work that we do with outreach to our veterans throughout the state of Minnesota. Our people, as we look at the Youth and Family Services department, is one that provides support and services for young people who are homeless and highly mobile. That includes housing, employment, and engaging them in multiple ways to help them become successful.

We also have several branches within the association that provide services for our New American Welcome Centers. That program is inclusive of really looking at social services and needs, in partnership with other culturally specific nonprofits in the area, so that our immigrant population gets all of their needs met to include family services, looking at social services, mental and health services, and whole life wellbeing services.

And our other program is sponsored through the UnitedHealth Group, and that is the UnitedHealth Group Equity Innovation Center of Excellence. The work that we do, there is work that really provides experiences for people to really become more engaged in learning of self and others in relationship to diversity, equity, inclusion and systems change.

### **Makeda Zulu**

Wow. That's fantastic. Well thank you. Glad to have you. We're lucky to get your time because I know that that's a lot of work in a lot of areas and a lot of connection. All right. Doug, do you mind if I call you Doug?

### **Doug Kennedy**

No. Please do.

So, my name is Doug Kennedy, and I'm a professor at, the Integrative Health and Wellbeing Research program. And I get the privilege of working with folks like Hedy as I build community relationships. As we work to be more visible in community and to really change the way that our team has been doing research. And for what my team does is our work really has the broad, long term objective of achieving health equity and pain management and complementary and integrative health.

And this is done by engaging community organizations and individuals all the way through the research process. So, in 2022, just last year, our project partners for pain was funded by the National Center for Complementary Integrative Health. So NCCIH, which is part of the and then which is also funded by the HEAL initiative, are helping end addiction in the long term.

And, that's to address health disparities and the opioid crisis. And partners for pain is a community engaged research project. And that's where you and I have come to know each other over the years. And, it's got the goals of increasing access to evidence based, non-drug and complementary and integrative health approaches to pain and then also helping to improve pain management.

Pain self-management and overall well-being for people with back pain who have been underrepresented and marginalized in both research and health care. And that last point is really particularly important for us. Because what we do know is that up to 80% of people in the US experienced back pain at some point in their life.

And when we look at the data, we start to unpack that. It's people of color, those with less education, those lower income have the poorest outcomes. And most of the time, while this discomfort can be temporary, for some, that pain becomes chronic and then disabling, and it is one of the most disabling conditions in the world.

So, you know, we look at opioids as being one of these things that's typically prescribed for it. But as we know that can lead to these huge problems overuse addiction and overdoses. But we're seeing more research emerging that non-drug options like complementary integrative therapies can help

people take charge of their health, their well-being. But unfortunately, because of disparities within health care, these approaches are inaccessible to many people, who could potentially benefit from them.

So, what we're trying to do, and this is where our work with Hedy is so important, and our other community partners is to build relationships and work closely with our community advisory team, our partners, to better understand community experiences and social context of health and well-being. and to involve communities at all stages of the research.

And that includes disseminating information, you know, in our findings so that community organizations can use this work for community grants, and other purposes. So it's these collaborations, in particular in cooperation between patients, community members, organizations and researchers that we can co-develop and evaluate creative solutions for the pain and opioid crisis. Really glad to be here today, and especially to be sitting here with Hedy, who has been instrumental in our work, and for for many years.

So thank you.

### **Makeda Zulu**

You're welcome. And thank you both for being here today. The first time I had a chance to meet Doug, we have something called a, a faculty open house usually in the spring. And so we talk a little bit about UROC, our history, how we do our work, our values, just so that people are exposed and, and hopefully to kind of invite more people to this type of work in a community that supports engaged research.

So I really enjoyed meeting Doug, back then. I think we connected pretty quickly, which is really important because Doug's work, his engaged research is deeply engaged. So, you know, engagement can happen on a spectrum, right? Or a continuum. And, and all continuums are, you know, any place on that continuum is important, right? And so what I'd like you to talk about, the reason why I'm talking about engagement is how did you and Hedy come together? Because when I, when I hear, you know, the YMCA of the North and the work and social responsibility, you know, the words, okay, this is good work, but I don't necessarily see how it connects to pain management, health and wellness. Yes. Overall. But how did you two come together? And how did you all, stay together? You understand?

### **Doug Kennedy**

Gosh, we actually started on a program that was about health and wellness. It was about getting adults aged 50 and older to be more physically active. We had partnered, my research team, had partnered with the YMCA of the North. And when we were looking at our first recruitment data, the numbers weren't good.

You know, we were not reaching underrepresented populations. And, we set up a meeting with Hedy. I just came on to the team and you were very frank and honest with us about what our team needed to do. the way that we were undertaking our research, the way that we were engaging with populations, our recruitment strategies, and you were very, very blunt.

And that was back in 2019. And Hedy then, well, we partnered with you in the Equity Innovation Center. You have been a confidant and mentor for both me and my team as you've worked with us and our team on, you know, what we might call it, "insitu-training", specifically, what researchers need to do to connect better with communities to be more deeply engaged.

And you've pushed us to think, and now here we are, a large, you know, NCCIH grant, taking on big problems, looking at health disparities and your name on the grant. And I'm so thrilled that over the course of these last four years that we've been able to to work with you and to really have you as part of our team so I can stop there.

You can give your side of the story and this one.

### **Hedy Walls**

Well, first of all, it has been an honor and a pleasure to have this partnership. Second of all, it is amazing that my honesty and frankness move them to action. Cause that doesn't happen all the time, especially with an institution as large as the University of Minnesota is, and research in general. My experiences in working with Minneapolis Public Schools for 17 plus years gave me an eye for having researchers come in and do research and just that they do research.

There is no engagement, no time to interact with the people that they're researching, but they are drawn from conclusions that, in my definition, could be biased just based on the fact that they don't even know the people that they're researching. So how do you research and capture data when you don't even have a clue on who the people are?

So, as I brought that into the conversation, with Doug presenting at the Y and meeting that we had, I was shocked. I think it was months later that I got a phone call saying, "hey, we have some funding. We like to talk to you about how we can do this research differently." At that point, how could I say no to really wanting to say, this is my opportunity to prove that there's a better way to do research, and here we go.

So, we partnered together. And with the work that we've been doing in the UnitedHealth Group Equity Innovation Center of Excellence around engagement and helping people to understand self and others, we utilize that same curriculum and we work with the researchers, Doug's team. And not only that, we spent time doing learning experiences, but I actually became their personal coach to speak.

So we would have meetings and engage what's happening, what's going on. And they would talk about their experiences and what was happening in the community. And from that we would talk

about, okay, so have you thought about this? Here are some things to think about. And through that learning experience, which was a journey for all of us, I am so amazed at the outcome in the results that have happened and or happened in and to hear them say, hey, we are in the community, several times during the month, we are engaging, we are working.

We're talking with people. We are working together. That is real, authentic community engagement.

### **Hedy Walls**

Well, can I quick flatter you to this one as well? Because it was that journey and and you stuck with us and I think, you know, and when we were talking out in the lobby earlier, right when I said that you took a risk on our team that was chosen very, very carefully because as you spoke about, you know, the experience of there's a lot of check of the box, you know, type of engagement or, you know, training that's done. I think that could be very cynical or very jaded, but you stuck with us and we haven't done everything perfectly. We have a learning curve just like everybody else. So thank you for that. And one of the things that that I've really enjoyed about working with you and, and when you said that you've been a coach to our team, when I go into meetings and I hear my team talk about things right, asking the questions, it when it went deep and you spent a lot of time with us.

And I hope that, you know, when, when we've had a chance to either grab dinner together or talk on a zoom call or something that you know, the impact that you've had on people and that it goes beyond that very surface. Right? It's not just about an ad in a newspaper. It's not about a one off volunteering thing, but you've effected deep change.

And so it's really great to be sitting here with you and being able to talk about that journey and, I hope that in the future we'll have a chance to, you know, disseminate more about what that's like, because it is challenging work. And you've seen that too, as you've worked with many, many groups, that this work is uncommon and it's challenging. But it is, you know, I keep thinking, it's exciting, it's energizing, and I'm gonna go out on a limb. I'm just gonna say it's the right way to do work.

### **Makeda Zulu**

So I like that. I like that, you know, you always said a few things that I want to come back to. But before I ask you a little bit more about the recruitment, that was not good or, hey, we have some funding or a journey, which is a midwest turn. That means there were some challenges. We didn't agree, but we stuck with it.

You know, I think the Tutu sisters used to say, you know, in order to make real change, you just have to refuse to walk away. So it sounded like, you know, to me, that's what journey means. What I'd like to know, though, because as people are listening, community folks, folks from different institutions, academic institutions who may hear this, what type of person is able to do this work is able to work across the boundary.

You all are boundary scanners as I see it. So who are you though? Who are you Hedy? Where are you from? Tell us a little bit about yourself. You don't have to go deep. Who are you?

### **Hedy Walls**

I'm Hedy, the daughter of Henrietta and Lemar McNair, Sr. I have one brother. I was born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during the civil rights movement.

I grew up in segregated communities. As a matter of fact, my father built the house that we lived in all our life. And it is still there as a legacy to what you can do. Yeah. regardless of your race, your situation or your economic status, my mother was a schoolteacher and my father was a contractor.

But my mother always said, you can do better. And that was instilled with me. And even though I had an incredible opportunity for education, I went to a collegiate K-12 program at Southern University, HBCU, and then went to Southern University for my degree. My mother always said, "you can do better." Yes. And so because of that experience and having a coach, mother, coach as well in my ear, 24/24. Moving into Minnesota to go to grad school at the Carlson School of Business at the University of Minnesota, which is where I got my MBA from having the real experience of what it means to be an African-American woman in an all white, segregated school, predominantly, and then having to survive that to get that degree.

I learned how to focus. I learned how to persevere. And I learned how to not give up. And in engaging with my children growing up in Bloomington, schools and being a helicopter mom and really staying on top of it, I had two boys and daughter, but staying on top of the two boys and really looking at how they were being educated and treated and having the opportunity to work in Bloomington schools where I have these parents all of these parents of color, coming to me with all of the issues that they're having.

It opened me up even further to what is really happening. Yeah. And then to go to Minneapolis schools for 17 plus years and get deeply immersed in what people classified as the urban community, I realize that we all had a responsibility. We each had to do something, watching what was going on with the research. It was in my heart, 15 years ago, if I could have an opportunity to get a handle on how research happens within our community, we have a better chance. And it came with Doug and the work that they were doing.

### **Makeda Zulu**

Thank you. Doug, can you tell us who you are?

### **Doug Kennedy**

I don't know if I can actually speak after that.

So, I grew up actually in a small Midwestern town about three hours from here. My dad went to work, my mom didn't, and he was a social worker. and education was really prized in our house.

Ended up in the Midwest at Carleton. And, you know, when I think about what happened afterwards, is probably the most salient for this work because I'm not a researcher. I'm not an academic by my initial career, we all come together from the education arena, and I taught school for decades, and I taught and teacher education, as well. And I think it was actually that moment in, you know, in the classrooms where I would see students, that would resonate with certain teachers that, you know, that would do well.

And I became very, very curious, very fascinated with the idea about people's capabilities and behaviors. Right. How do we actually do this? And I'm a human scientist on the clinical trials team that looks at back pain, which is really, really unusual. In fact, like, you know, my doctoral work actually informs the work that we do now, because I was looking at behaviors of teachers in terms of how they're teaching culturally responsive pedagogy.

It's the "how" like, that's what I want to know about. And when I was hired by this team and the conversations we were having with Hedy, I found like really a kindred spirit, someone who who was doing who had done the deep work, who was going to speak just directly and and have high expectations for us to get into the the how do researchers do this work.

How do they take, you know, these pieces of, you know, diversity, equity, inclusion, the research practices and make sure that they're doing a better job? But it's got to be I think we've called a number of times it's that heart work as well as not just knowing the head work. And it's that idea about, you know, whether it was working with teachers to better connect with their students or now whether it's researchers to better connect with their participants or community members.

But it's that internal work that "how." And what I want to do, and I'm glad that you're on this journey with me Hedy, is that, you know, can we explain it? Can we, you know, break it down? Can we operationalize this so that someone doesn't just read a paper, you know, in a journal article and they're like, oh, okay, you should do this.

But what are these capabilities that we need to develop in people? What are these opportunities that are there? And how do we address their motivations? You know, so it's like we've got our research that I'm really excited about because I mean, health and equity is, we have to address this, right. That is you know, bar none the issue.

And then we've got the opioid crisis. And now we're layering on top of that. How do we best do our work? Because we do know the harm that has been done. We do know that we still despite having, you know, statements about, you know, inclusion of underrepresented populations, it's still an issue. So I, you know, I'm really excited about this work.

And that's been kind of the throughline, even if this is a second career from, you know, teaching social studies for, you know, a bazillion years. And now my former students live in my neighborhood and things like that and say hi and say, Mr. Kennedy. And, but that's the important part. And I see that, you know, we're pointing in the direction of these three really, really important issues.

## **Makeda Zulu**

Well, thank you both. I know our time went really fast. But for the audience that's listening, I want you to know that these two folks, they walk the talk, and I admire them both greatly. They know that. I haven't seen Hedy in a long time. but I first met her while I was still working with young people. And she was an encourager, and she gave me money every now and then. but what I hear from both of you, is that, you know, you came from households with folks who really cared about you, and had very high expectations, and told you that you all could grow. What you said specifically was you can do better.

And as I hear you talking about your career as a teacher, I feel like you were also trying to connect. And how can we do this better? So it seems like, you know, one of the ingredients to a really good partnership is that the individuals are really solid in who they are first. So that when you come together, you know that you can grow and learn from each other.

I have found that, you know, there are people we don't work with everybody here at UROC, because some people are not clear that they can grow. They are here to help us grow. But they don't see their opportunity to grow. And so, this podcast is not for you, who are only here to teach. This is for folks that want to grow.

And these two are very outstanding. So I want to, before we go, make sure that your websites, if you all wanted to share, if you want, so that folks can learn more about you when the podcast is over.

## **Hedy Walls**

So the Y of the North is [ymca.mn.org](http://ymca.mn.org).

## **Doug Kennedy**

You can actually see Hedy on our website for its [partners4pain.org](http://partners4pain.org). And you can actually see Makeda there to learn about our grant and the ways to participate.

## **Makeda Zulu**

Thank you. Both.

A special thanks to Nina Shepherd, Senior Communications director for the Office for Public Engagement and UROC.

Today's episode was produced by Blackbird Revolt, engineered by Stan Tequila, edited by Jordon Moses. Please make sure to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. To learn more about UROC and our many community partnerships visit [UROC.UMN.EDU](http://UROC.UMN.EDU).



Thanks for listening.