

Evan Schneider:

Hi Ben, how are you? Good to talk to you.

Benjamin Thornton:

Hi. How are you doing, Evan?

Evan Schneider:

Great.

Benjamin Thornton:

How's everything?

Evan Schneider:

I'm great.

Benjamin Thornton:

Good.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. Thank you so much for joining us today.

Benjamin Thornton:

No problem. Thanks for asking me.

Evan Schneider:

Well I'm just going to jump into it. Our first question is what is Anchor House and how does your organization serve the Trenton area?

Benjamin Thornton:

So Anchor House is a multi-service agency. We've been in business for the last 42 years in the Trenton area. We work with homeless young adults and youth and their families, but we specifically work with individual homeless youth.

Evan Schneider:

Great. So you serve the homeless population in Trenton.

Benjamin Thornton:

Right. We serve the youth homeless population of Trenton and we serve youth up to age 24 right now.

Evan Schneider:

Okay, great. Thank you. Can you share a little bit about your journey to your current work? What brings you to this work and what sustains you while you engage in it?

Benjamin Thornton:

Sure. I grew up in Trenton. I grew up in the projects in north Trenton, and my outlook on life was pretty much shaped by my interaction with the people there who, for whatever reason, found it their job to try to help a lot of us get our education and things like that to have a brighter future. So growing up immersed in that sort of environment where most of the older men, older women that I knew were like mentors that were trying to help me become successful in life. I come from that experience, so that's in my blood to serve others and to help people facilitate change for the better.

Evan Schneider:

That's really interesting. It's kind of like a full circle thing. You were mentored as a youth and now you're mentoring youth.

Benjamin Thornton:

Right. Yeah, most of the people that I grew up with who came from that late nineties graduating high school era that were really influenced by the adults back then that were really trying to help our young people. I feel a lot of the same folks that I grew up with in the field who went into a helping profession.

Evan Schneider:

That's awesome. So tell me how has Princeton or the Pace Center partnered with you and Anchor House and the work that you all do? What are some of the ways that volunteers and partners have worked with you over the years?

Benjamin Thornton:

Well, my first experience with Princeton volunteers with the service there was in the form of volunteers that came to the Anchor House to help us each year with various different projects. Those experiences with those volunteers is very different than a lot of our typical experiences with volunteers, as the students from Princeton were really into service. I didn't understand where that was coming from until my experience as their community partner in Redmond. They sort of are asking the bigger questions about the service and it becomes a little more than just they're helping us organize things, they're planting, they're helping us paint. It becomes more of a relationship with other people for whom services is a virtue for them.

Benjamin Thornton:

Those experiences really leave an impact on us. They leave a really big impact on our youth. They ask about the Princeton volunteers, when they were coming back. And the overall impression of a service project with the Princeton volunteers was that it was fun and you don't hear that all the time. You might get some work out of some things but our youth and our staff enjoy those interactions with Princeton volunteers. So I think that was my introduction to it.

Benjamin Thornton:

Of course there have been spin-off projects from the various different streams of volunteers that come to Princeton and we get the same quality of engagement from Princeton volunteers. In the last semester, I guess in 2019, I served as the community partner in residence and got to see up close a lot of the training, a lot of the thought that goes into planning service for students. That has really inspired me

in my work, and I took that type of energy back to my organization to really get more out of our volunteer service and out of service in general.

Evan Schneider:

That's really interesting. You mentioned a couple of times that you served as the community partner in residence. Can you just briefly say what that means? Specifically, you were with the Pace Center.

Benjamin Thornton:

Yes. Yes. That's taking me back. So the community partner in residence is exactly what it sounds like. Princeton, they select a community partner each year from the neighboring communities. In my case from Trenton, from Anchor house, an agency that serves homeless youth. I worked up on campus for the semester throughout the week working with students, teaching and talking about how to engage the community to get the best impact out of your service project. So that was a really thrilling thing to do. It was really great to meet students who were that serious and fervent about service and how to do a great job with it and get the most out of it, as a student as well as a human being. So that experience was really good for the semester.

Evan Schneider:

Thank you. I had to ask you that question. I know the answer but other folks might not.

Benjamin Thornton:

Right.

Evan Schneider:

It was really wonderful to get to work with you for those few months and get to see the rapport that you developed with the students and the real value that you brought to that work, in terms of helping students understand what attitude is the best attitude to bring to a service project and how to engage specifically with the Trenton community. So thank you so much.

Benjamin Thornton:

Well, thank you guys. I just wanted to mention that while my tenure there as community partner in residence is over, and ended in December, we have ongoing projects and relationships that were spin-offs from that experience as the community partner in residence. So that continues. And the two other community partners from previous years are still active and working within that system. So I just wanted to mention that wasn't sort of a finite experience as a community partner.

Evan Schneider:

Okay. Do you want share a specific project that spun off?

Benjamin Thornton:

Sure. So let me think. We met with a few different cohorts, but I'll say maybe the one that are my young people would discuss was when we came up on campus for some presentations. I forget the gentleman's name but he was one of the exonerated... the men that-

Evan Schneider:

The Central Park Five?

Benjamin Thornton:

Right, the Central Park Five. Dr. Yusef Salaam.

Evan Schneider:

Okay, yeah.

Benjamin Thornton:

And we got to bring our leadership group from Anchor House, the Youth Advisory Council, to the campus for that talk that evening. And it was a really great talk. It was really inspiring to our young people.

Benjamin Thornton:

We've had a cohort come down from Princeton to Trenton where we had dinner with our young people and students from Princeton just to build relationships and talk about gun violence and some of the things that we can do to impact that. We met with a young lady, Kiki, who is starting a library with our young people and we talked with her about her passion for philosophy and things like that.

Benjamin Thornton:

So these are all spin off relationships and activities that we did in that semester that will continue. So those were great experiences. I wish I had one of my young people here to kind of give a testimony about that.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. Thank you so much. That's really helpful to hear those specifics.

Benjamin Thornton:

Sure.

Evan Schneider:

So if you don't mind, I want to shift this into kind of the reason for this ongoing series, which is sort of talking to people, meeting them at the point of their expertise but then kind of hearing a little bit about how the work has changed or is evolving because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Benjamin Thornton:

Sure.

Evan Schneider:

Given your experiences on the ground doing the work that you do, what do you feel like is the most important thing for your average person to know about homelessness right now?

Benjamin Thornton:

Right. Homelessness by itself is a crisis in and of itself for the people experiencing homelessness. But the impact of COVID-19 basically agitates and exacerbates everything that's already wrong with anyone experiencing homelessness.

Benjamin Thornton:

So if you could imagine for the average person right now the anxiety and the things that are going through our heads as we manage and this crisis, you might want to imagine for a homeless person what would that look like for them? So if you suspected yourself of being sick, how do you isolate yourself from others? If you're symptomatic, what would general care look like for you if you have no bed to lie in? Or no kitchen to warm a drink or thermometer to track a temperature? These are things that for everyone else these are just things that we need to do to stay safe and to stay well, but, for homeless person, these very simple things are just not sort of in the atmosphere for them to do.

Benjamin Thornton:

Instead, you're walking around all day. You're transient or your held-up in a place that is not meant for sleeping, let alone for getting well or for recovering or for keeping yourself out of danger of contracting the virus. If you don't have gloves or masks or sanitizer, how would you navigate your day? Especially when you're standing on lines to receive services. And that depends on if those services are even open during this crisis. So you could just imagine some of the issues with being homeless. Everything is magnified in terms of their access to services and how they would actually go about getting the usual services without contracting the virus.

Evan Schneider:

All right. Do you know if there's any sort of active testing going on for homeless populations?

Benjamin Thornton:

I am not aware of any active testing specifically for homeless individuals outside of what our testing protocol is right now. If you feel sick, you know ... And, again, that exemplifies how if you're a homeless person, what doctor do you call? Who do you explain your symptoms to if you don't have a general practitioner or anything like that. How are you getting good advice? And if you're using an emergency room you may be exposing yourself to the virus just to get medical attention. So these are the types of things that we should remember about our homeless population and how a crisis like this really impacts all of the things that are already wrong.

Evan Schneider:

So let me ask you, how should we understand or frame the discussion of hunger and homelessness with regards to both youth and adult populations? And, specifically, how has that shifted in this moment in light of COVID-19?

Benjamin Thornton:

I don't know that it's shifted. In fact, I'm hoping that it does shift the perspective for our community that tends to think of homelessness as a thing but we don't really connect it to public health. I don't know if you've ever heard me on my soap box, Evan, but I present homelessness a lot of the time as a public health issue because that's actually what it is. And when we separate it from general health, from public health, then it gets isolated and we're not looking at it in the right perspective. Something like this really magnifies that homelessness, in and of itself, becomes a public health issue because this is where

something like this could spread when you have a community of people who, by the very nature of the situation there in, have to be around each other, have to be in lines, or have to be at a counter or something in order to discuss services and try to help the situation that they're in.

Benjamin Thornton:

So I think, and I have always thought, that homelessness and hunger these things should be in the proper frame of public health. We should discuss it in health classes. It should be in educational literature as something that impacts health. Hunger, food and security should be a part of our health services framework. If people can't get healthy food, we all know that that's going to impact our health care and that even translates into money and expenses.

Benjamin Thornton:

We have the studies that back these things up. The ACEs data that talks about adverse childhood experiences, homelessness and hunger and security would be one of those types of experiences. And they most definitely impact health outcomes for people and, in some cases, very seriously.

Benjamin Thornton:

I think as we have this conversation, as the crisis exposes some of the cracks in our system that people fall through, hopefully it can plug those in the hole for everyone. Because, as homelessness persists, a crisis like this could really take off because you have a condition in communities where people have to fall through these cracks and get services otherwise. So I think that this is sort of a moment where if we do the right things we can solve some structural and systematic problems that give rise to conditions like homelessness and hunger.

Evan Schneider:

You mentioned that things haven't really begun to shift at all for homeless populations in light of COVID-19, and especially in terms of I think how maybe the government is thinking about that population. I'm just curious what are some challenges that you've seen arising for that population right now? And are there policies that have been enacted in the past that you feel like would be really helpful to come back around to right now?

Benjamin Thornton:

I think universal precautions in general in the workplace. We always talk about it, but a crisis like this highlights the importance in our everyday work to pay attention to these types of health concerns and the way in which we engage our public. We meet with a lot of individuals and a lot of those policies and protocols quite likely is protecting our clientele from us as opposed to the other way around in a lot of cases. I think that the situation itself shines a light on some of the fixes that are necessary going forward. So I think the policies that we'll use to manage this crisis will be proven and tested by this crisis. And then on the other side of it, I think those will be much more efficient processes and healthier protocols for us to engage our population for any services.

Evan Schneider:

That makes sense. Thank you.

Benjamin Thornton:

Yeah. And the logistics of where we had in-person meetings and things like that, we could work a lot more efficiently through some of the tools that we're using now. Some of the paperwork that we use for clients for Section 8 to enter the housing system, some of that paperwork is being done now through some of our rock stars at Mercer County Services and DCA and people that are working from home to make sure that we can forward the paperwork for our clients to remain housed. Those who have come out of homelessness and into the housing system, and for those who are on that journey, to forward their paperwork and things like that while some offices and things like that are shut down. I'm seeing new people that I'm at meetings and working with everyday in the new light in terms of how people have been able to coordinate and adjust to make sure that our most vulnerable are served.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, that's heavy work.

Benjamin Thornton:

It is. It is.

Evan Schneider:

Well, so I want to give you an opportunity to talk a little bit more about Anchor House and, specifically, I know a lot of non-profits are really struggling right now with budgets and things like that because everything is shut down. I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about any pressing needs you have right now, and what can people who hear this do.

Benjamin Thornton:

I think, specifically for Anchor House ... And, by the way, I'll give a shout out to DCS and the Office of Adolescent Services and these organizations that are licensed and support some of our programming for the guidance and everything that they've given agencies that do this work. So we got a lot of guidance. We got a lot of everyday meetings, calls, check-ins, where those governing bodies are ensuring that our young people are getting the service that they deserve.

Benjamin Thornton:

For Anchor House in particular, I would encourage anyone who's listening to this to support organizations like Anchor House that do this kind of work. In a situation like we're in right now, it really highlights the importance of these types of institutions in our community that are serving our most vulnerable.

Benjamin Thornton:

We are in need of food donations to support some of our young people who have lost their jobs due to the closings of some of the places where they work. Assistance for our young people who've been housed. They're paying rent but they've lost their employment. That can cycle us right back into the cycle of homelessness for some of our folks. We would take donations for cleaning products, and, in general, financial support to Anchor House. You could donate directly and everything that you give and all of the support that you give will go towards this effort of making sure that our programs can serve our young people at this time where some of our normal resources are disrupted or on delay. That type of support really, really helps. So when you can financially support our organization and you can see us at Anchor House, Inc. online and we're on Facebook.

Evan Schneider:

Okay, great. And can they find out how to make donations if they visit your website or should they contact you directly? What's the preferred-

Benjamin Thornton:

Sure, they can contact us through the website. There's contact information, information about donating certainly through the website. Or they could reach us directly at (609) 396-8329. That is our main number at the shelter. Anything that you could donate, time, financial resources, food, you could call that number and check and figure out how it is that we could accept that donation. There are some donations, of course in a situation like this, that we can't accept. But we certainly could use the support. That would be the number to call if you're interested in supporting the organization.

Evan Schneider:

That's great. Thank you. So kind of looking forward, that might be a little bit difficult right now since we're so much in the midst of it, but how do you envision your work in a post-COVID-19 world? What do you think would be different and what do you hope people will learn from this crisis?

Benjamin Thornton:

So I look forward to it. We're in a crisis right now. Crises have, in many cases, been catalysts of motivation to change and to facilitate change that will be better for everyone going forward. So I'm hoping that this crisis can teach us a lot of valuable lessons and test our systems to make sure that they work in bringing services in extreme conditions.

Benjamin Thornton:

I think this'll sharpen all of our processes to be more efficient outside of crisis. And by efficient, we can see a hundred moves that we don't need to make when we have to operate this way. I think that it should reshape the priorities of our community, hopefully our nation and shed light on the people who do the work that keep us healthy and safe. Everything that I hear, newscasts and everything, I don't think that's getting lost on anyone that these people who put themselves out there to serve the community are, in fact, first responders and they're essential staff to serve our most vulnerable, who, outside of crisis, have challenges accessing our system for resources. Some of those problems and bureaucracy and red tape are things that we know about and that we've been trying to improve even outside of this crisis.

Benjamin Thornton:

I think that it will be different. I think that I pay attention to, like I mentioned before, a lot of the people that I'm in meetings with and working through in our system in Mercy County that I'm working with and they're working from home. These are the kinds of things that make me hopeful that after this crisis, in many ways, our jobs will be a little less challenging because we've developed the muscles and the coordination and the reflexes to serve our people better.

Benjamin Thornton:

On an everyday level within this crisis, for me, I get the front-row seat to our young people who, prior to a crisis like this, they were struggling and doing the things that they need to do to survive and to thrive. And to see their resilience, to see how they fight through a crisis like this, how they come together, how

they build community in a situation like this is truly hopeful. Outside of this crisis, I think that some of our young people and some of our people who work to provide these services might discover a lot about themselves because of what we were called to do during the crisis. So I think that looking at all this, we can pretty much make it through anything together. And I think that'll be the lesson for a lot of people who are working through adversity right now, and, after the crisis, picking the pieces back up with people who've kind of gone through the dark tunnel with you I think will be a good experience for all of us.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. It does seem like it's a great opportunity for our entire society to look at the red tape we have in place and say, "Is this really necessary"? I feel like we're all doing that anyway right now.

Benjamin Thornton:

Right.

Evan Schneider:

So it might be a natural process of implementing new processes where possible moving forward.

Benjamin Thornton:

I think it'll also prove to us that we are who we say we are. On the other hand, if we get through this crisis and we leave behind our most vulnerable and we don't support the systems to take care of people who can't take care of themselves and it gets very lopsided and favors people who have money, power and influence, then I think it'll reveal some other things to us as a nation and as communities that we have to deal with and take seriously. Are we a nation or a community that supports those less fortunate or are we a community and a nation about power and privilege and people who are struggling, who are working class and poor, are they the servant class? I think a crisis like this could expose maybe some of the darkest things we don't want to think about. I'm hopeful that this will do exactly what it has been doing. In my experience and with the folks that I work with and the people that we serve on the more hopeful side of that situation.

Evan Schneider:

In uncertain times like this, it's often helpful to identify possibilities that give us hope. So you mentioned that a little bit and I just wonder, right now what gives you the most hope?

Benjamin Thornton:

So I mentioned the people I serve, the young people that I work with who are diligently using cell phones and Wi-Fi and scanner apps and things like that to take care of their business and to thrive and to make sure that their children have what they need. That's very inspiring to see people who have known struggle thrive in a situation like this and never lose the resilience that they've built over the years. So that's one of the things that's really hopeful for me to see and gives me hope right now.

Benjamin Thornton:

Of course, our medical personnel, I'm a first-responder with the volunteer fire department 100 percent in East Windsor. And just to see the people who run toward the problem, the medical personnel who are in robes at the testing sites and still working at the clinics to serve people who not well, even against

all odds for them and at risk to themselves. Those are the kinds of things that I look for in times like this and there's plenty of that to go around. I don't think you could spin around once or twice and not stop where you see the epitome of courage and of networking and basically looking out for each other.

Evan Schneider:

Well, Ben, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you for the service that you do in your volunteer fire department in East Windsor, and thank you so much for the work that you do with homeless populations in Trenton.

Benjamin Thornton:

Well, thank you so much, Evan, for giving me this platform to talk about some of the struggles of the young people that I serve and to talk about my agency and some of the needs that we have in order to do the work that we're called to do. So thank you so much for this and great work.

Evan Schneider:

Absolutely. It was my pleasure. Nice talking with you.