THE STORY GOES | KIM JEFFRIES | BRIGHTON CENTER

MOLLY: Hey! It's me! Molly. Cox. And I'm here with Kiran Kaur Bains, also with SA2020. And Kim Jefferies (fancy voice) the CEO of Brighton Center. Why do I always do the introductions in that voice? I haven't quite figured it out yet.

KIRAN: And also, Kim Jefferies. You have to say it like that always.

MOLLY: Altogether, like it's one name. This is The Story Goes, a collaborative podcast between SA2020, the nonprofit organization that drives progress towards a shared community vision for San Antonio, Texas, and KLRN, your public television station. So, it's like a fun little partnership we got going here. (0:33)

KIRAN: Kim, we are so excited to talk to you today. The Brighton Center is a nonprofit organization here in San Antonio that you lead. It is a SA2020 nonprofit partner. You are doing an incredible job with your team moving the needle in family well-being, education, and so many areas we look forward to advancing in our Community Vision, all in the service of people with disabilities, specifically kids. I am curious to hear how you came into this work and where does this passion come from for people with disabilities and children? (1:05)

KIM: Oooh. That's a really good question because it took me like 40 years to figure out why I got into this work.

MOLLY: You mean since you were born? (laughs)

KIM: I mean, I'm a little bit older than that, but yes. A few years ago, I really realized what's driven me is when I look at something, and there's injustice, so something that's not right, that really fuels my fire and my passion. It's been almost 20 years, so 19 and a half years ago I applied for this random office manager job, and walked into Brighton Center and I knew what they did a little bit, but I didn't really know, and I was just going to do this office work behind the scenes. I actually had three other interviews that week booked—

MOLLY: with other organizations?

KIM: Yes, other nonprofits, other organizations. I walked out of an old home in the Monte Vista neighborhood, so it's super warm and inviting and charming. I walked out of there and called all of the other ones and told them I wasn't coming. I hadn't even gotten the job yet.

MOLLY: I want to work in this cute, old home!

KIM: I knew I was going to figure something out, even if I didn't get the job, how I was going to work at this place. So, I happened to get the job, and I worked behind the scenes for a few years, and then, "Oh, this director left. Can you run this program?" "Oh, this happened. Can you go over here?" It was events, everything. "We need to start an event" – started Taste of the Northside. It was just like everything was thrown at me, and I had this wonderful opportunity to fuel my passion, but also use my talents. (2:35)

MOLLY: You've been with Brighton Center almost 20 years?

KIM: 19 and a half.

MOLLY: So, you're like moving up into Brighton Center. I'm curious (A) How you applied for an office manager job at Brighton Center? What brought you to being an office manager at Brighton Center in the first place? You're just like, I needed a job. (2:55)

KIM: No! I actually, my whole family is educators. My mom, my dad, my older sister, my younger sister. So, my mom was like go get a degree in education. That's what you're supposed to do. It's the family business. (MOLLY laughs) I was doing that, and it really wasn't my thing. So, I dropped out of college. I was like, this is not my path. Got a real job in the world, and then was like "Hmmm, $19,000 seemed like a lot of money, but it's not." So, I went back to school finished my education degree and got a minor in business because that's what I was better at. I have this weird combination of an education degree with a minor in business because that was where my skills set lied and that's what I really enjoyed. I was working at Six Flags Fiesta Texas in a full-time capacity in their HR department. Then, I had a baby, met my husband, all of that kind of stuff, and then was like, once I had a baby, I can't work on the weekends. I can't work on holidays. This is terrible, so I got an office job.

MOLLY: And at Fiesta Texas when you are just inundated with children all day long. (ALL laugh)

KIRAN: That prepared you. I am also thinking – Kim, I love you so much—that you started as an office manager. We often times say at SA2020, and it's important to be respecting the hierarchy of knowledge that exists across the breadth of an organization. Tell us how your perspective starting at an organization in this way has shaped your leadership today as the CEO. (4:19)

MOLLY: That's a really good question!

KIM: And it has, 100%. Because I was able to maneuver through all the aspects of the organization, and the different programs seeing how it worked, being behind the scenes and seeing the support services made a difference in what we were doing out. From the HR perspective, happy people means quality service. They are happy, so they are providing better service. So, working all those back ends and then working through the programs, it's easy for

me to lead people because I have more perspective on what they are going through. So, not always, so if I don't, I go back out in the field, go on ride along. I still do that stuff. Like, okay, I'm getting out of touch with this. It helps remind me that I need to do that. I kind of worked my way up through the organizations. We have a lot of people who have done that. We call that home grown. We've added some people externally because you need that, too—that balance. So, the homegrown I respect, but how do you add to that to ensure the organization is moving forward. (5:25)

MOLLY: So funny that you used this idea of homegrown and also recruiting new talent, that's kind of what San Antonio is experiencing right now. This idea of us recruiting people coming in to take jobs because they are available today, and how we are also build up our homegrown talent, so we can fill jobs with them as well. This leads us to the idea of complex community challenges that San Antonio sort of has been sitting in for a minute that we keep kind of raising the red flag on. Hey, we are having these challenges around college attainment and workforce. We have some challenges around housing affordability and mobility, generally. We are having problems around child abuse and family violence. We are still having challenges around early childhood, which is where Brighton Center sits most specifically. Then, how early childhood influences college attainment and workforce and everything inbetween. I appreciate sort of the trajectory of you getting to Brighton Center, and I want to spend some time talking about what Brighton Center is. It's one center clearly, in the middle on Monte Vista in a house. (6:33)

KIM: That's where it started. Now, we have an 8 acre campus out on the northeast side of town that we are renovating, so we have two campuses which is fabulous. You know, it's one of those things, for any kiddo early childhood is important. That 90% of brain development, and all that research that we know about, happens in the first five years of life. For us, it's like how do we look at kids that may be struggling just a little bit, so they may have a delay in their development, maybe they have a disability, or they could develop it later, whatever that is, to make sure, how do we get those kids in the scheme of all kids, are ready for kindergarten. So, how do we get them the therapy they need at the right time to mitigate some of those delays? How do we make sure educationally they are prepared to enter kindergarten? So, everything that we do is that continuum from birth until kindergarten to make sure they are absolutely as ready as they can be. Then, when they transition into public school, we have an entire program dedicated to make sure parents know how to advocate in the school, so they get their support from the get-go, which I think is critical, so they get the support by the third grade, they are reading at level and are not behind like **t**hey normally would be. (7:44)

MOLLY: It's sort of that soft- hand off to public school. You're saying 0-5. So, a kid is born and can come to the center?

KIM: So, yes. We can provide therapy services.

MOLLY: I mean, not immediately. Like don't come that day. (KIM laughs) Give us a second. When you say disability, are we talking physical, developmental, all disabilities?

KIM: Yeah, that's what I think is unique about us is because we mean anything. So, it's the Autism, the Spina bifida, the Cerebral Palsy, the Down Syndrome, all of those things, but it's also my kid is 2 and they only have 10 words. They should have 50 by then. My kiddo is not really walking or rolling over. Those kinds of things, and we have occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, all those people on staff. When kids come to our center for the early childhood, we actually go into the home for their therapy because kids learn best in their natural environment. If they're at home, they are more comfortable. They are going to learn, and then it's an awesome opportunity to teach their parents how to incorporate the therapy in their regular routine. So, if we go for a walk every day, how are we labelling things as we are walking to encourage language development. All of those things, so that we can give them strategies they can use, rather than therapy, so that it continues all day, every day. (9:02)

KIRAN: Correct me if I'm wrong Kim, but also Brighton Center acts as a connector and recognizes that the systems – the healthcare systems or the education systems—can be so hard to navigate, so there's also this support of, we will support you in connecting to the resources that you need and navigating these complex systems. Tell us more about complicatedness. (9:25)

KIM: Well, you know, it's interesting because special education programs in the public school system are overly complex, law-based, so you need a law degree to figure out what all the terminology is. And then, second, the systems are set up to be super intimidating. I'll give you an example. So, if you're a family, your child has a disability, and you're going to the school, they're going to evaluate them, and they're going to say yes you quality, and they are going to have a meeting. It's called an ARD meeting. So, you go to your ARD meeting, and the law requires the special education teacher, the regular teacher, whoever evaluated the child, somebody who can make a decision for the district, so it's usually an administrator, all have to be in that room. So, you as a parent, are walking into this room, and it's set up to be a super intimidating process.

MOLLY: The panel.

KIM: Right. You're literally on the other side of the table. Then they are saying, "Here's what we are going to do." Like, okay.. if you don't know any better, then you just agree with what that is. A lot of times there is more that the school can do or should be doing, so we make sure parents are educated. So, we do the education piece before we go there, but we also go with them to those meetings at the school to help them advocate. We have a before we go, we help them advocate there, and we kind of get a game plan for after, if it all didn't work out the way the parent wanted. (10:40)

MOLLY: Amazing. So, you act as advocates inside the room as well. I know, I feel like I just need that generally in my life. Kim, will you come hang out with me? Just go to all of my meetings.

KIM: Yeah, cause I have all of the time!

MOLLY: Right, cause you don't have anything to do *really.* As you are expanding your campus, your 8-acre campus and you're expanding as well, are you wanting to expand to other areas of the community? Or are you expanding that particular campus? (11:06)

KIM: So, we are doing a couple of things. We are really expanding programs. It was like program expansion drives facility to do the new programming. Right now, in the therapy program, we stop at age 3. It's a state contract. We have to stop at age 3, and you know it's interesting. We thought okay it's age 3. You know, if we are stopping that's two years. If nobody's got eyes on that kid for the next 2 years, and then they end up in kindergarten, the work we did is for naught. So, how do we make sure there is a continuum of care there. So, we were like we need to build something to close the gap. We initially were thinking we were going to fill that gap for the low-income families because 70% of the families we see are on Medicaid. Low-income families don't have a lot of resources in our therapy program, so that's what—

MOLLY: Because healthcare is an entirely different system we have to navigate as well.

KIM: Yes. But then, as we started talking to families and focus groups, we realized there was this whole group of families that are middle-income and have private insurance that cannot find therapy places that will take their insurance. So, we talked to a mom, and she was in tears in my office saying, "we went 11 months after we left you guys, and he didn't have therapy because we couldn't find a place that would take my insurance. And then, I did, and I switched jobs 6 months later. So, I had to start the process again. So, four more months." In the span of a year and a half, he lost 15 months of therapy service in a critical time in his development. So, we are like, "wow. Now, we get to fill this gap for all these families as well." We went in thinking it was going to be one thing, but we realized there is a whole other group of families that need help. (12:40)

MOLLY: You're identifying something that several people who come, in we way The Story Goes podcast is a place for us to tell a more complete story of things that are going on in our community. One of things you just talked about, and many people on this podcast have said, which is sort of like, being ready to pivot, ask questions of the things happening in their own organization, realizing we thought one thing and now we need to pivot, sort of meeting the needs of the community that you serve, and I'm interested I think – you gave us just an example of how that's occurring. There's a very specific way if we approach our work as organizations or companies or wherever, if we are like, "Hey, this is what we need to do, and

also let's see if that's what we need to keep doing to meet community needs." I'd like to get our feedback on what does that look like for Brighton Center and generally. (13:35)

KIM: Yeah, so, we have this, we always say we need to be curious. We need to be curious in our own organization with our staff, or curious with our family, and we need to keep asking—it's really asking questions. It's this constant asking questions of families, of staff, or what did they see because otherwise we sit back and make assumptions, and it's okay, but we got to get beyond that at some point. So, again, it's like what you said, what's interesting like 5 years ago, we went through a visioning process with our Board, and at that point we had this off-moment where you realize, when you're talking about kids with disabilities, all kinds of disabilities, no specific disability, and actually providing direct service, direct therapy, direct early childhood, and this warm transition into public school, we are the biggest game in town in the nonprofit space in the disability arena. We kind of have that proud moment, like ooh that's heavy. So, now we got to figure out what else we need to do to where these programs, like extended therapy from 3-5, and skill development camps for the summer, so kids can keep the skills they learn over the summer and not losing them. So, we are going to have reading camps. We are going to have handwriting camps and social skills camps. So, if you're talking to families, those are the gaps they have identified for us. (14:54)

KIRAN: I always love talking, specifically, to folks who are patient about increasing access for people with disabilities because there's something we also talk a lot about at SA2020 called curb- cut effects, that we love a lot that says, when you start to create, whether it's policies or programs, with the group who will be most affected by that particular program or policy, there will be a ripple effect across populations. So, speaking specifically to this idea of a curb-cut connects a street and a sidewalk, and then allow folks—it started with American Disabilities Act-- and then it created access for parents pushing strollers, and pedestrians who are able to walk will go out of there way to use that curb-cut. So, even as I hear your story, whether it's the support you are giving families, right, the adults that don't have disabilities that are supporting children you work most specifically with, or I'm thinking of the benefits that classrooms, once the children go through, for example, your pre-K program, benefit from the increased number of students that are kinder ready. Talk more to us about the ripple effect that you see the Brighton Center initiating. (16:02)

KIM: You know, it really starts in our center because we have an inclusive center, pre-K center, so there's kids with and without disabilities. It's so interesting because it's designed to give kids with disabilities the opportunity to learn from their peers, but it works both ways. Kids walk away with this value system that is the ripple effect of just the environment. We are not intentionally doing anything but giving them the space to know that, that is my friend, and that is the only label that they need. So, they walk away and go to public school, and they're more accepting. They're more inclusive. They walk away, and they have this value system that people are—everybody has something to contribute, and I'm going to find out what it is for that

person because I saw it from the environment that I came from. So, there's that ripple effect. I think the other thing is for families. I have a child that has ADD and anxiety, so she has a harder time in school. She has accommodations and that kind of stuff, so I've kind of lived it on a very small scale. There's something about when your child struggles that is the most difficult thing in the world. So, to wrap around that family and say (1) it's okay and (2) we're going to help you. We're going to figure out how to help you help your child. It's not like we are going to do it. We are going to help *you* help your child, so then you have the skill set to say, "I know what to do. I know how to ask for the right kind of support, and now my kid is doing better." There's a sense of accomplishment that comes with that, and then company productivity. You're not stressed out, so there's a ripple effect everywhere, but there's a ripple effect in the family dynamic that allows them to move forward knowing they can face what's to come. (17:44)

KIRAN: I don't have children, and I also don't have a disability, but just listening to you, it makes me want to be a better human.

MOLLY: Right, yeah. It's like a community trust fall. Like, we got you! Everything is fine. I'm always intrigued when we talk to educators, specifically, because you said, as a grown up, we encourage being curious. That's such a kid thing. We love it when kids are curious and asking questions. When we become adults, we just kind of try to work it out. Don't ask any questions, just do as you are told.

KIRAN: I know *all of the things.*

MOLLY: Right. It's like we stopped doing that, and it feels to me, particularly when we are talking, almost every single person we have on the podcast has that sort of innately in them. This idea that you should ask questions and be curious and sort of shift and change. I'd be interested to know, I realize you're sort of working in this space of 0-5, I know you're clearly creating partnerships and collaboration, this idea of wrap around services. Are there other agencies or organizations that you've created this beautiful continuum of care for families with children with disabilities? (18:49)

KIM: Absolutely. We work with Any Baby Can very closely, just because they are working specifically with families of children with Autism. So, we do a lot of work around the Special Education piece, and then what they need to be looking for with their kiddos with Autism, what they need to be asking for. There's other things the school is required to do if the child has Autism, so we work with them a lot. They do case management. So, we do case management up to age 3, but from that, it's on to somebody else. We move them to Any Baby Can in order to do that. We are working on a partnership with Respite Care San Antonio to bring Respite to our families at our new facility once it's completed because they need that break. They need to be able to know their child is cared for appropriately, but they also get a little bit of a break. So, we work with them now, but we are working on an intentional partnership with them. Kinetic

Kids we are working—they're going to run a Sports Fundamentals Camp once our campus is done. We are trying to, how do we from 0 to really 8, those elementary years, give everything we can to the child and the family, so that they can see all the opportunities there are and push their kids to do more. (20:02)

MOLLY: I'm going to take us sort of sideways for a minute because it's important that you're here, and you're talking about that intentional partnership, which I appreciate so much. It's not like, "Oh, we fell into this thing." Consistently, we are hearing this dominant narrative: Nonprofits are doing duplicative services. They don't partner well. There's a negative dominant narrative. In our work, we see all the time these amazing partnerships, and as somebody who has been in, particularly moving up and across, moving up, down and across one organization for 19 and a half years, can you talk about the nonprofit sector generally, and the partnerships, the intentional partnerships, that you're creating? (20:46)

KIM: I hear the same thing. People are always like, "you're duplicating services." But we are *not,* we are complementing each other. So, it's like *yes,* and we've had relationships with these nonprofits and other nonprofits over the years. It's really been the last 5 or 6 years, we are not just referring. We are working. It doesn't work for the family, to be like "Call this number. Call this number." So, how do we create something that, "I'm on your campus." And that's proximity is a little bit of it, but I think one of the challenges with it, is figuring out that you aren't duplicating services, and how you are complementing. So, it's being in conversation with the other leaders to say what are you doing, what am I doing, how does it benefit the families, and where are those crossover opportunities? But you have to have trust. So, like it takes a while to build the relationships, to have trust with one another. I'm a part of the Autism Lifeline Links Collaborative and have been since the beginning. Literally, our first 6 meetings were like "What are you doing? You're not going to step on my toes, right? And I'm not going to take your people." Until we got into this place of trust, now let's get into the real work. You have to be willing to have those conversations and leave your ego out the door and not worry about those things because it's all about families and making sure they're the focus. (22:08)

KIRAN: Yeah, and it's the idea actually that you're changing narratives then it two ways. It's both changing the narrative about the impact of nonprofits and the nonprofit sector, and also everywhere you began was, we're changing the narrative of people with disabilities, how we think about people with disabilities and really leading with an asset-based communication. Both I would say, changing the dominant narrative and asset-based in all the ways we think and do our work, again more themes we have heard from folks that come into this room, working with us. (22:38)

KIM: Yeah, you know, everybody talks about kids being successful in life, and we want our kids to be significant.

MOLLY: Kim Jefferies, I want to give you all my money right now.

KIM: No! I'll give you, there's a kiddo that I worked with, he went to Brighton literally 30 years ago, I think he's 34, 35 now, and I work with him at my church. He can read and write. He still lives at home, and some would say he's not successful. He is significant because everyone who meets Chris, loves Chris, and he brings you joy everywhere he goes. He brings you back down to the things in life that are important. He'll be like "this is my friend!" He calls everyone his friend. He has Down Syndrome. He just has this joy about him, and I'm like, that's significant! That's a significant life. So, I think we focus on significance. Yes, we want kids to be successful and meet all those metrics they're supposed to meet, but there's also value in the significance of their life. (23:39)

KIRAN: I'm speechless now. (MOLLY laughing)

MOLLY: I'm like, "write all your checks to Brighton Center care of Kim Jefferies." I'm like, that's so beautiful right. If we were just thinking of all children as significant, right. Alright, we try to end every podcast with a call to action. There were about 55 that you said inside what we already discussed. Again, everything that we do, any resources we mentioned today, can be found online at klrn.org/thestorygoes, but give us a call to action for somebody listening today that wants to learn more. What do you say they should get up and do immediately after the podcast is over? (24:21)

KIM: So, I would love for everybody to get up and set judgement aside when they see someone with a disability, and be curious. So, it's one of those things, like I'm going to open the door for that person. That person can physically probably open the door, even in a wheelchair, open the door for themselves. They didn't ask for your help, so it's looking at that person as a whole person. The disability is just a small part of who they are. I think the kid having the meltdown in the store, it's not because they're a brat. It may be because literally, this has happened, 5 years ago Doritos changed their packaging and one of our moms said my kid is having a meltdown because it looks different. He wants Doritos, and he's screaming they aren't Doritos. It's like just set aside judgement for a minute, and look at the whole person. So, if we could do that more, in society we would be much better off.

MOLLY: Yes, agreed.

KIRAN: Stop side-eyeing people.

MOLLY: Yes, stop side-eyeing people. (25:19)

KIRAN: Stop side-eyeing.

MOLLY: I love that, so calls to action today: Be curious. All kids can be significant. That one I need on a t-shirt and a bumper sticker.

KIRAN: Yep. Be significant.

MOLLY: Be significant. Kim Jefferies, thank you so much for doing this.

KIM: It's fun.

MOLLY: I'm just going to keep calling you Kim Jefferies.

KIM: Everybody does.

KIRAN: With the accent though.

MOLLY: What accent?

KIRAN: the one you started with.

MOLLY: Oh. *Kim Jefferies.* It's my radio accent. Thank you so much for doing this.

KIRAN: We appreciate you.

MOLLY: And all the work that you're doing, that's amazing. It's The Story Goes. Klrn.org/thestorygoes. Whisper for today is obviously—

ALL: (whispering) Be significant. (26:00)