

Living the Mission Episode 5: A Fierce Love with Chris Knestrick

Delaney [00:00:05] Welcome to Living the Mission with the Center for Service and Social Action. I'm Delaney Burns.

Caroline [00:00:09] And I'm Caroline Maltese. Pull up your Adirondack chair.

Delaney [00:00:13] Or grab your favorite snack from The Tween.

Caroline [00:00:14] And come chat with us and some friends about experiences that have shaped our values to promote social change.

Both [00:00:19] And Live the Mission.

Delaney [00:00:24] Hey, Caroline.

Caroline [00:00:26] Hey girl what's up?

Delaney [00:00:26] Glad it's Friday.

Caroline [00:00:28] Yep.

Delaney [00:00:28] Happy FriYay.

Caroline [00:00:29] Happy Friday, everybody.

Delaney [00:00:30] We've successfully made it through another week here.

Caroline [00:00:32] What week are we on?

Delaney [00:00:34] Week eight maybe.

Caroline [00:00:34] Oh Lord.

Delaney [00:00:35] Yeah, I'm pumped. It's Barrio Night.

Caroline [00:00:38] Barrio, Barrio!

Delaney [00:00:42] Weekly Barrio. Anything new in your life? Anything you want to share?

Caroline [00:00:48] No, we're go with the flow. What happened this week? Ugh, just kind of like schools kind of getting hard.

Delaney [00:00:54] It was really hard this week for me.

Caroline [00:00:56] Can anybody relate? I feel like it, I just sort of like got hit by a bus with school like it was nothing, nothing, nothing, I was cruising and then it was just like all at one time.

Delaney [00:01:06] Yeah. I had a bad week like a couple weeks ago when I thought that was like my midterm week. And then this week just things just kept piling and piling and piling. But yeah, I'm ready to get ahead and keep cruising and not take it for granted because, you know, things are passing by.

Caroline [00:01:22] That is true.

Delaney [00:01:24] So today we're focusing on the value of common purpose.

Caroline [00:01:28] And common purpose has to do with working in unison with shared aims and values. It facilitates the group's ability to engage in overall collective efforts or analysis on the issues at hand in regards to the tasks that have to be undertaken.

Delaney [00:01:41] So today we wanted to bring someone in. We're really trying to highlight some different voices that we don't typically hear from at John Carroll, but some people who are still connected to our community. So we have Chris Knestruck. He was an adjunct professor who sometimes teaches classes at John Carroll and he works for NEOCH. He also has some relations to CSSA as they do the Summer in the City internship with NEOCH, but we really just wanted to talk to him and hear about some deeper connections to common purpose and how we really need those roots of connectedness in order to aspire to be someone who can live out the value of common purpose. And we thought that his embodiment of a life of service and justice and how he lives his life on the mission would be interesting to hear about in regard to the value of common purpose.

Caroline [00:02:32] Yeah, I'm excited. I don't know, Chris, so this will be an interesting conversation.

Delaney [00:02:35] Yeah. Let's get started.

Caroline [00:02:37] All right.

Chris [00:02:43] So my name is Chris Knestruck. I'm the, my title at work is I'm the executive director of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless. So we run an agency that does kind of kind of exists to end homelessness in our community through loving, fiercely loving folks, and doing advocacy, education, and outreach. So we work mostly around housing and homelessness issues and everything that entails. I'm a father to a beautiful daughter named Juniper, who is the light of my life. And then I am a partner to a beautiful woman named Julie Myers, who used to work at John Carroll. Fun Facts. I love to fish. So I've been trying to do a lot of fishing this summer and this fall. And I'm from Cleveland. I grew up in Lakewood on the West Side. I lived in Columbia, South America for a long time doing human rights documentation and accompaniment. In the midst of the civil war down there. So I did that for many years. I lived in Chicago and got I'm kind of, the higher education I have is mostly around religious studies and philosophy. And yeah, I went to seminary. So I'm kind of really deeply rooted in like faith-based activism and social justice and systems change. Yeah.

Caroline [00:04:05] Awesome.

Chris [00:04:06] And I teach a class at John Carroll every once in a while.

Caroline [00:04:09] And what is your class called?

Chris [00:04:11] Social justice and poverty.

Delaney [00:04:13] Poverty, yeah. Poverty and poverty and social justice. I had the honor of being in the class.

Chris [00:04:19] Delaney was a great above average student.

Delaney [00:04:22] Thank you.

Caroline [00:04:26] This is a little tradition, so we have been asking all of our guests what their favorite snack from the Inn Between is. Do you have a favorite? Like a go-to option.

Delaney [00:04:35] Or your favorite college snack.

Chris [00:04:36] Gosh, we had these salads in college that were great because they put French Fries on top of them and then they put chicken tenders on top of them and then they put cheddar cheese on top of them. And then you put ranch dressing on top of that. And it was a glorious salad. It was not a snack, but it was my favorite meal.

Delaney [00:04:56] OK. So we will keep rolling. One of the things that we were interested in hearing from you about was what does common purpose mean to you?

Chris [00:05:06] Yeah, I think common purpose means to me, is like multiple things, but I think, you know, I'm, feel really deeply about community and like how we live in community and exist in community, you know, and that can be like, you know, we exist in multiple communities at any time. But I think for me is like, how are we, we guiding and directing our like, our our work as a community towards a common purpose for like the betterment of all, right. And, you know, in our work and what I see that it is, is really like a community can, you know, in the Catholic social teaching aspect, like, make that community is making a preferential option for the poor, you know. And so its daily practices is always kind of really looking at its, it's you know, what it's consuming kind of how it's spending its money, how it's, you know, walking through the world for a purpose. And that purpose, in my mind, should be through a preferential option for the poor. But like, and it kind of exists in all strands of that community. Right. It's not just like you're going out, you know, Tuesday and you're going to volunteer at a soup kitchen, but it's like, yeah, you're going to do that on Tuesday. But Wednesday morning when you wake up, you're also going to be thinking about, like, how am I walking through my day? And like, what what actions am I doing that will continue to further, you know, social justice and the common purpose for all people at all times. And so, yeah, like I think a lot about that. And I always want to put it in context of community, you know.

Caroline [00:06:45] Absolutely. Would you be able to tell us a little bit more about your work with NEOCH? And like what a typical day would look like for you and your connection to CSSA in terms of maybe like Summer in the City if you wanted to elaborate a little bit?

Chris [00:06:58] Yes. So NEOCH's kind of, our work is, you know, we exist to end homelessness. And the root causes of homelessness through fiercely loving our community and doing organizing, advocacy, and education right? And that really means lots of different things. But I think what it is,

is we know, you know, everywhere in the United States, we know that people that are experiencing homelessness in our community, people sleeping under bridges, under under railroad tracks and kind of NEOCH exists to work with them, to be able to find permanent housing options. But more than that is to also develop a common purpose within within our community that will work towards ending homelessness. Right? And I think that's multiple. Like, it means that people that are experiencing homelessness have human rights and civil rights. Right? Just because you're homeless and you have to, sleeping in a park doesn't mean that you can be trampled upon or that you don't have the right to vote. Right? We've been doing a lot of voter registration with our community and getting them, you know, making sure they know how to get to the polls, making sure they have access to the polls, making sure they're registered to vote. Because we fundamentally believe that, you know, the right to vote and and cast a ballot, you know, it doesn't matter if you're housed or unhoused or poor or rich, like everyone has that right. And how are we making sure that that right's guaranteed to people that are unhoused in our community? And so, I mean, I think our work is very multifaceted. We have, we develop a Homeless Congress space that folks come together that are currently unhoused and like they work together for a common purpose of like looking at like I'm living through this experience of homelessness right now. And I know I'm running into barriers to getting permanent housing. And I can see those barriers or I'm running to issues in the services I'm getting. And like collectively, people that have that can come together and, like, demand change. Right? They can also work toward social justice. Right? We're not only like you know, I think our work is not only as particular people that have privilege, whatever it may be, that that we're working to further social justice. But we're working in partnership with them. Right? They have a common purpose to see justice done in our community, just like we do. And how do we align both of that together? And that's really what NEOCH's about. I think a given day is like, you know, I think under COVID, like it's been really crazy. Like, you know, we've, a given day can be anywhere like someone calls our office is like, I'm getting evicted. What do I do? Me and my kids are getting evicted. How how can you support me? And it's like walking them through, you know, whether it's the Right to Counsel Program, the housing assistance that's happening in our community and like sharing resources with them. So there's like that part of the work. Some of my work is really boring. It's like writing reports and, you know, like you all, like writing papers and doing all of that stuff. And then, you know, some of it's like thinking creatively about how to end homelessness. Right. Like, what policies can our community put in place that would really prevent people from entering into the homeless system and like trying to figure out, you know. All right. We know that this policy could really shift the rights of tenants in our community. How do we get that, our government to get buy-in, and political will to be like, hey, that's actually a good idea. So that's like the advocacy work we're doing. And then sometimes it's like I'm getting harassed by the police, like I'm on Public Square. Can you come down there and help me? You know, it's like responding to a variety of crises at a moment, you know, while being able to, like, really think about longterm policies and and ways to end homelessness. You know?

Delaney [00:10:46] And then kind of going along with your work, is there a particular time or somewhere in your life, whether that be with your work or your home or throughout your experiences, that you have felt the relevance of common purposos?

Chris [00:11:00] Yeah, I was thinking a lot about this question and, you know, I could think of NEOCH, but I think if I thought about like when I think about what common purpose means and like seeing communities like work deeply together to, to achieve, like a goal that leads towards justice. You know, I did human rights documentation in Columbia for many years and we would work with communities that were being forcefully displaced by multinational corporations. And

we would also work with human rights leaders and pastors and priests that were threatened with death. For their, for their work towards justice. And I really remember a community called in Buenos Aires, Colombia. And it was about 200 people gathered at this moment from the Los Pavas community. And they were actually getting ready to retake their land that has been stolen from them. And kind of like we woke up at 5:00 a.m. and we gathered in prayer, gave thanks to God and, asked for protection from all the armed groups in the region, and kind of this deep understanding that everyone was well aware of the risks they were taking to return to this land. Like that year alone, there was forty five human rights leaders assassinated for returning back to the land. It was dark. There was no light. And as we walked through the jungle, there was, you know, the community held a flag and it said, returning to the promised land, the miracle of Las Pavas. And at that moment, I was living in Colombia for about three years and I worked with a group called the Christian Peacemaker Teams. And the Las Pavas family that we were accompanying at that time was made up of one hundred and twenty three families. And at that time, there is around five million displaced people in Colombia. It's the largest internally displaced population in the world. And they were removed from the land a year ago, about a year ago, by a really large palm company. And, you know, we arrived as the sun was coming up and these, you know, families were entering onto their land. Like we walked past the military and we walked past the guards. And they're all just singing this song, it was "my brothers and my sisters don't give up the faith. We're here to stay." And over the next couple of days, they retook the land, they built housing. They replanted their corn crops. And through it all, like the death threats, they tried to imprison the leaders. They offered them the community thousand dollars, thousands of dollars in bribes. The community really remained strong in its common purpose that was kind of led by a faith in God that provides. But I think of like, that moment as like a moment where I saw a community, like, so clear on its common purpose. Right. Like, this land is our land. Like we were born here. This is our common purpose is to farm this land and sustain one another. And we want to do it in a way that is like environmentally friendly. And we want to do it in a way that will allow generations and generations to remain on this land. And like for me, that is like the clearest, like idea that like, working together towards a common purpose that is leading towards like a just outcome, which is that this community was able to return back to their land.

Caroline [00:14:44] Wow, that's an incredible story.

Chris [00:14:46] It is an incredible story because there was really incredible people.

Caroline [00:14:51] So as we sort of wrap up here, this is our last question that we have for you. And how do you see the value of common purpose then playing into the John Carroll mission?

Chris [00:15:04] Yeah. I had to look up your mission.

Delaney [00:15:06] Excelling in academics, service, and leadership in this region, in the world. Something along those lines.

Chris [00:15:13] You know, I think there's, how do how does John Carroll excel in common purpose in its mission, right? And I would really ask the question as like, you know, how how are students, like, holding John Carroll accountable to its, like, mission? Right. Like, how is the whole community, like, coming together to be like, you know, we want to excel academically, but we also want to excel in service. And like, building a sense of, like, camaraderie, I can't even say that word, like common purpose, I guess, within that student body to be like, yeah. Like, it's not only the

administration's responsibility, but it's our own responsibility to hold that together. Right. To excel in these in these ways.

Delaney [00:15:58] Yeah. But I think even in just what you've been saying in the stories that you've told, I think it's even like made me think deeper about common purpose, that it really does go to the roots of something. And I think sometimes, like even with this, we've been talking about like some of these like values. And maybe we'll talk about how it applies to like college life for some of the things that we've been encountering. But I think like what you're saying and the essence of common purpose, like it really like it goes to the roots of something.

Chris [00:16:29] One might say it's radical, getting to the root. Right?

Caroline [00:16:35] Well, thanks, Chris, so much for joining us today and for sharing your stories.

Chris [00:16:40] Take care. Thank you so much.

Caroline [00:16:42] All right, Chris. Thanks so much!

Chris [00:16:43] Bye Everyone!

Delaney [00:16:47] Thank you for gathering with us here on Living the Mission.

Caroline [00:16:50] We hope that you continue to journey with us as we learn how to be socially responsible members of our community.

Delaney [00:16:56] In the meantime, connect with CSSA on all your favorite platforms:

Caroline [00:16:59] Instagram,

Delaney [00:17:00] Twitter,

Caroline [00:17:01] Facebook.

Both [00:17:02] See you next time.