



## **Conversation with Xavina Walbert & Karen Suarez**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the work that you do today?**

**Xavina Walbert:** My name is Xavina Walbert. I am the neighborhood development program coordinator here at Uplift San Bernardino. What brings me to the work is a full circle story where I started off not even working here. The foundation that is the nonprofit for Uplift San Bernardino provides mentor-supported scholarships to all students in the school district. When I was doing my applications my senior year of high school, I applied for one of the scholarships that they offer, and thankfully I received it. The foundation was there to support me kicking off my journey as a first-generation college student, not just financially but also with a mentor from my university.

Last year I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and a Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy with a concentration in environmental economic policy. Uplift San Bernardino invited me to come back as neighborhood development program coordinator. I was hired based on my experience but also because I reflect the community that I would be serving, which is low-income, apartments, public housing. I grew up that way: single mother, low income, public housing. That would add to how I would be serving them as well.

**Karen Suarez:** We preach to hire local, so we model hire local.

**Xavina Walbert:** That's another thing. I was also born and raised in the City of San Bernardino, which is the city that we serve.

**Karen Suarez:** This is home, and when you are serving in your own backyard, there's just a different motivation and a different level of commitment to do right by a community. I actually was born and raised in Los Angeles. I grew up in the Inland Empire and I feel like my most transformational years were when I was in college, as a first-generation college student as well, here in the city. The

community really wrapped their arms around me. My parents couldn't help me navigate the system, so they did. I wouldn't be where I'm at today if it wasn't for the residents and the leaders in the city of San Bernardino.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Tell me about the journey that brought you to the work that you do today as well.**

**Karen Suarez:** I'm the vice president of collective impact for the Making Hope Happen Foundation serving Uplift San Bernardino, which is our collective impact initiative. My story is full circle too, because in my professional career, I've always been in service to this city. I've worked in nonprofit. I've worked for government. I've worked in education. I've worked for the corporate sector, and then this opportunity came up to go back to nonprofit and do more boots-on-the-ground work while also looking at the bigger picture, vision, strategy, collective impact, stewardship, and all of that.

I have a bachelor's degree in psychology and human development with an emphasis in child development, so youth has always been a passion of mine. Then I have a master's in higher education administration with a concentration in advancement, so fundraising. I've always loved nonprofit work, and I really believe in higher education and certification programs that allow you to get into higher-paying careers.

All of my experience in all of these sectors plus my education really came at an intersection in this work. I actually use my degrees. I'm taking all of my learnings from my entire paraprofessional and professional career and honing in on those skills all in one place. I love doing cross-sector work. I love doing collaborative work. I love being able to work in community and share all of the knowledge and information that we know exists in our community, and I really love amplifying and making sure that people are connected to local resources, because we are very rich in assets and culture in the city of San Bernardino.

I love the analogy that my peers have shared with me: I get the view from the balcony and then I also get to get on the dance floor. I'm able to work alongside our team and my colleagues in the community to help us fulfill our mission, which is to make sure we build a generation of successful adults who are committed to growing roots in the city of San Bernardino.

We want this because we have so many wonderful institutions. We have a community college. We have the Cal State University System. Folks don't have to go far to pursue their education and their training.

We seem to leak a lot of our talent to other communities, because there's a strange perception that there aren't opportunities here, but this region is rich with opportunity. We are helping make those

connections, bridging opportunities for our youth and their families. We are working on a housing pipeline to generate jobs as well as more housing inventory for families to live in. We're also working with our small business communities so that we can support local entrepreneurs and ensure that San Bernardino has a large small business backbone and community. We just absolutely love working with our schools and our youth because they get to help us solve the problems that we are not going to get to.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What is distinctive about the work that you do?**

**Karen Suarez:** What I love about collective impact is that the drive is your heart. Because even in the absence of funding, our network continues to work together. Sometimes we don't have sufficient funding to redeploy to some of our partners who are helping us do the work, but they do it anyway. I really value that piece.

It is not the funds that drive the work. It's truly the love and the collaboration and the trust and respect that we have for each other, that we have each other's back. We support them when they ask us for their support and help. We find ways to leverage all of our resources to make sure that it's for the greater good of the network.

With internships, for example, we have the time and capacity to coordinate and work with our university partners. Then we help do matchmaking and get the student groups to support individual organizations within our network.

I think that's what makes our work unique. With some organizations, it's just not possible for them to do what they want to do if there isn't funding tied to it. We find ways to lean on each other to still make events happen, to still do outreach. We hosted a job fair that was not initially part of any of our scopes of work, to be honest. We just asked. Our interns were the ones that wanted to do it. They raised the money, they brought in community, they brought in their peers, their friends, their family. They had over 300 families go through that event. I call it the collaboration of the willing.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How do you find and maintain those relationships?**

**Karen Suarez:** Our work is relationship-driven. We have to have authentic relationships from the get-go: I want to get to know you. I love what your organization is doing. How can I support you? We're very service-oriented. We're able to build trust quickly.

It helps that we're from the area. We grew up here, we know this city really well, but also I think the love that we have for our community is felt by others very quickly. Ultimately, it's forming those

authentic relationships, and just like any relationship in our lives, you have to maintain it with regular communication and individual touchpoints.

We have over 60 partners, but with those partners, it's not just one person that we have a relationship with. It's multiple people, and that's also important. You don't just have relationships with the CEOs and then talk to them whenever you need them. You develop relationships throughout an entity and engage them more meaningfully right across the organization.

The key is following up. There was a quote on LinkedIn that said, "If someone comes to mind, just reach out. If you think about someone, just reach out to them because there's a reason why they just popped in your head." I think we do that. It helps us maintain those bonds.

**Xavina Walbert:** We don't like engaging in transactional relationships. That's not our preference. That's not where our heart is. We like engaging in nurturing relationships where it's like we truly get to know the people that we work with, and like Karen said, not just the CEO, not just the face, but also the rest, and really nurture that relationship. Not just contact them when we need something but offer support even if they didn't ask. You don't need to ask; we want to support you. Not really expecting anything back. Of course, that would be helpful as well, but that just happens organically.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What's something that has been a glimmer of hope for you in this work? What has stayed with you as a story of impact?**

**Xavina Walbert:** In my role, resident engagement is my focus. I serve as the bridge between residents in a certain neighborhood called Arrowhead Grove and the multi-sector partners that we have, like Loma Linda University Health and El Sol. Resident meetings used to be once a month. Now they're twice a month.

The whole point is to elevate the power that already exists within those residents but just hasn't been tapped because of structural barriers. I have been serving as the host and facilitator. Over time, with trust, the residents are going to be the ones that are hosting the meetings, facilitating, planning everything, even making budget decisions.

It goes beyond those meetings. It's about the residents. We formally invited the residents to join something called the CACHI Sub Steering Committee, which is our decision-making group. We want them at the decision-making table. We don't just want them as an advisory group.

The residents expressed interest in a community art project. One of the residents brought up the idea of a time capsule. I've only seen that in movies. Those actually exist? It was a resonant idea. The other

residents were like, yes. That's a good idea. We sent out a survey to get the numbers and it was a winning idea. I provided the connection to a local arts organization. We've been working with them. We just had our third workshop. One of the residents said, "I want to start an arts committee. I want to spread more awareness about this project. I want to go door to door, talk with neighbors, but also I just want to talk about art in general, creativity in general, something self-sustaining beyond this project, and just have a space to talk about creative stuff in our neighborhood."

**Karen Suarez:** This is such a hard question for me. There's just been so many glimmers of hope. We see in all aspects how Uplift permeates into the community. I see it in the form of more residents at City Hall saying they want more housing. It wasn't like that three years ago.

I love this energy. It's not just us; it's other partners and us saying we need more. People have decided to get on that bandwagon of more housing. It's also a state issue. Three years ago, we weren't having conversations about increasing housing. That gives me a lot of hope, watching folks be engaged. Folks that normally don't come to City Hall are coming to express and share their voice.

I see glimmers of hope when I look at our students who did our internship program and when we first introduced them to electrification and electric vehicle charging stations, and then to where they designed and implemented their own job fair to graduation in one year. They know a whole lot more than I ever did as an 17/18-year-old going out to the world. That gives me a lot of hope, because they can take that to their peers, to their families, to their networks, and the next generation after them is going to have so many more opportunities than what we've had.

Then also when I see a small business owner get connected into our networks and be served by each of the different partners who are a part of this work, who've committed to San Bernardino, and then they get to do a ribbon cutting because they opened up their brick and mortar, there's a lot of tangible examples of that our work is working.

Again, it's not just us. It's not me, it's not Xavina, it's not Nodalia, it's not Heather, it's not Ruben who's now working for the county, it wasn't the staff. We are the glue. We are the glue that keeps the collaboration going. It's hard when you have your day-to-day, your mission that you're working on.

When folks come to this space, this concept of Uplift San Bernardino, it's with the intention of that north star that we are creating a San Bernardino where our families can grow roots here. We're doing it. We may not be the lead, but collectively, when we see a business open, that's a win for everyone. Or when we see that student graduate or pick a career in STEM or arts or when we see that family move into an apartment or a house, that's a win.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What has been a big insight or a takeaway from the work that you're doing?**

**Karen Suarez:** I have a more technical aspect of it that I think is super helpful: building the infrastructure from the get-go. Our collective impact is incubated under a larger entity, a larger nonprofit. It's a foundation, Making Hope Happen Foundation. This happens with a lot of collective impacts. I've studied collective impact galore and there's so many different ways to do this. You can be incubated, you can also just start your own 501(c)(3) and start from scratch, which I don't recommend actually.

I do think you need to have a very clear roadmap of where that collective impact is going to go in one, three, five years. What ends up happening is the work grows wild. It happens—it just grows rapidly and in a short period of time. If you have already thought about what happens if we get to this point, then that triggers us to make sure we have a strong back office infrastructure: strong accounting, strong HR, strong legal, marketing. Basically, your business model.

That's important when you're being incubated. You're building it as you're going or you have a very clear plan that when we get to this step, then we're going to go here, when we get to this step, then we're going to go there. That way everyone's on the same page as the growth happens.

Because here's the thing: I wish Uplift didn't exist, because we're trying to solve for systemic issues. There's so many systemic issues and inequities. That's why nonprofits exist. I wish that the sector didn't have to exist, but it does. For as long as the problems are not solved, I do hope that this work outlives me and whoever is the next leader and whoever is the next, and that they have a strong foundation to build off of. The foundation of an organization matters. That's the wisdom I would drop. Either work on that concurrently or have a plan so that you are anticipating your short-term and long-term growth.

**Xavina Walbert:** For me, I would say it's similar with regard to the cohort that Uplift has been working with and serving as the backbone organization. It's the CACHI cohort. CACHI is California's way to make health systems more equitable and healthier overall. This is a movement beyond California. There's three principles to the initiative. Centering community voice is the number one. Multi-sector engagement, number two. Then number three is aligning systems and priorities. There are 37 Accountable Communities for Health, ACHs, across California. The one that we are in is called, for now anyways, Uplift San Bernardino ACH, but the name is going to be decided by the residents and by the cohort. It's probably not going to stay the same.

It's a multi-sector engagement. Nonprofits are working together with local health organizations like Loma Linda or Dignity Health. We're also working with the housing authority, so the government sector. We're working with the residents, as a partner—not as our client or our target population. No, they're our partner.

I'm saying all of this because the foundations of this cohort are important too. Our cohort is still working through our processes and our infrastructure to make sure that we're being equitable and that we're truly co-designing. I would emphasize, with an effort like this, as Karen said, that you have those processes and that infrastructure set from the get-go, as early as possible.

Another insight I have is just to trust the residents more. This is my first time carrying out resident engagement in this way, where it's about civic engagement but at the local level, starting at the neighborhood level and building that trust. I would say trust the residents more, because even though I trusted them already, it took me a while to ask them, "Hey, can you volunteer to help me plan the meetings? Can you volunteer to help me do meal distribution or help me pass out flyers?" I wish I did that earlier on, because they're ready, they want to get involved, they care, and whoever's going to step up is going to step up. Definitely trust the residents more early in the process.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders can do to move the conversation forward? What do you wish we were talking more about when it comes to healthy communities?**

**Karen Suarez:** It's interesting. We have decades-long data where we know exactly where the unhealthiest intersection of our city is. I wish that leaders would be more bold. Bold enough to say, this isn't working, so we're not going to do that anymore. Or ask the question, how are we doing this? If it's not working, how are we going to do it differently? Oftentimes we get a lot of, "Oh, my hands are tied because of the regulation." So how do we fix the regulation?

Leaders need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. We are not serving the community efficiently or effectively if we continue to have marginalized communities get left behind. Yes, good job that you served hundreds of thousands of people. But we are not successful until everybody's thriving. That's a big call to action for those that are in positions of power to help us make the difficult changes that need to happen policy-wise, regulatory-wise.

It's hard, because even policies are not one size fits all. Even though laws are blanket for everyone, they always end up hurting someone. We really have to take a look at how we improve to make sure that it's inclusive and it doesn't harm a segment of our community. That takes boldness and a dismantling of systems that we have been accustomed to for the history of our communities. Also,

acknowledge the histories and the harms. That's really important. Make space for collective healing, as what happens in disinvested communities is that we just haven't healed from all the traumas of things that have been done.

I'll give you an example of infrastructure. We had a freeway built in the middle of our city, and it divided the west side from the east side. When they built the freeway exits, they all went east, and it decimated the commercial corridors on the west side.

It wasn't until 2010, when all that recovery money came through the Obama administration, that our transit authority built the exits for the west, but the damage has been done. We're even seeing it now. We have a bridge that connects the northern portion of our city to the southern portion on the west side of town. We had to tear it down. It needed improvements. It was supposed to be done in a short period of time, but because of COVID it extended and made the project more expensive so it's still not done. We're four years in, and it's still not completed. It has had a negative impact on a lot of our businesses along that corridor.

You're just compounding the existing inequities from the past into the present. Again, we have to ask the tough questions, and we need leaders who are willing to take risks and say, "You know what? We're not going to do that this way." We are not saying break the law, but let's figure out how to change it if it's not working for everyone.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges that have come up in doing the work, and how have you worked to overcome them?**

**Karen Suarez:** At first you're met with a lot of skepticism. You have to be consistent. You have to have unwavering belief in the work that you're doing. You have to. If you don't believe in it, this isn't for you, and that's okay. For me, the challenge has been our intentions being misunderstood. They're still not sure. They have one toe into the work and the rest is out here doing their own thing, which is fine. I know it takes time to build that kind of rapport and trust, but that's why being consistent is critical.

For us, it has been building that trust. It's delivering on what we said we were going to do. It's very easy to get distracted by the day-to-day and by the emergencies that happen in our community. We just had a fire in one of our buildings yesterday. It's very easy for all of us to pivot because something is there.

The city might have a crisis, or there's something happening that requires all of our attention and we need to show up at City Hall for a reason. Being transparent helps us overcome those challenges, and lots of communication, leaning on relationships, ensuring that we're cultivating them, that we're dedicating time to our network, that we know them well and authentically. When we don't do that,



that's when people will think, "Oh, you just got a bunch of money, are you hoarding it? What are you doing with it?" It's very easy to question where our loyalties lie. We're very clear that our loyalties lie with the community. This is led by folks from the community. Our partners are dedicated to the community; we're dedicated to the community. We live in the community.

We're also always going to face the fear of the change that comes with transformative work like this. Like, this will mean that then people will want to move here, and there's going to be all kinds of growth, and we're going to attract too many people, and those people and different people. It's okay for us to grow and become a different community as long as we're not displacing people and harming our neighbors. Growth is not a bad thing, but it can be very scary for a lot of folks. Those are the very real fears. They say that 99% of conflict in a relationship is because of fear.

Just as in any relationship, we have to be able to navigate those fears and deal with those conflicts as they arise. We're always going to be facing them, because we're human. When we fear something because we don't understand it or because we don't know or we might have some sort of insecurity as an organization or as an individual, it's important for us to lean in and help diffuse those fears.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How do you define wellbeing? What does collective wellbeing mean to you?**

**Xavina Walbert:** This is a new term that I learned throughout my position here. It's a whole framework: the seven vital conditions for health and wellbeing. I'm still learning more about it myself, but I love that what's unique about it is the civic muscle and belonging aspect. I love that because if we're not involved in our community and we don't feel like we belong, then that definitely affects our health in various ways. The fact that it acknowledges that housing affects our health, transportation affects our health—all these things that are not typically identified as determinants of health.

Really, it's just, where's the equity? We can do things to advance the seven vital conditions for health and wellbeing, but where's the equity part? Unless that organization or that individual makes an intention to center equity throughout that process, then it might get lost. You can see the data: yes, more people are using public transportation. More people are housed. But whose house? How sustainable is it? Not just in the sense of environmentally, but also how long are they going to be housed? All kinds of things, with equity at the forefront.

**Karen Suarez:** I like the framework to get that shared language across the collective, because that's also part of collective impact work: how do we get a shared understanding of the work that we're doing? How are we defining housing? How are we defining who we're serving? How are we defining the word "equity"? The definition of every single word in our mission, because everyone interprets

everything differently. I love the vital conditions for health and wellbeing because it's a nice simple common language you can plug yourself into: I see myself in reliable transportation because of the work we're doing, and so on. I think that if everyone is in optimal thriving, then everyone's collectively well. If we can get to thriving on every single one of those metrics, then we're doing it. I think that framework helps us have really meaningful conversations in the community.

Everyone has to play a role—everyone. Even a child has a responsibility, and that's to be a child and go enjoy the parks, for example. Go play on the playground, get some exercise, run around, be a child, play. That is their responsibility in our community. They have to make use of these public spaces so that we can keep them and take care of them and preserve them. Everyone, including a baby, has a role in our community. We need to care about the individuals in our community who are not thriving.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything I didn't ask that you want to add to the conversation?**

**Karen Suarez:** I just want to express my gratitude for having the privilege of being a part of this work.

What I am most grateful for is that people believe in what we're doing and have invested in what we're doing, and have invested in our ability to do this glue work. And I hope that other funders consider funding unrestricted glue money.

To keep people working together who would otherwise be too busy to coordinate a meeting and put an agenda together and bring people together to solve a problem. I'm most grateful for the unwavering belief that our network and our systems and our families and youth have in us, which allows us to continue the work. I hope that it can inspire those who have the capacity to consider investing in us as the glue of our communities.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Wonderful. Thank you.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*