



Kerrin Mitchell:

Welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast.

Tim Sarrantonio:

We're your hosts, Fluxx's co-founder Kerrin Mitchell, and Neon One's Tim Sarrantonio. We've spent our career learning how to leverage technology and data in the social sector to better connect and serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

Kerrin Mitchell:

In this podcast series, we profile leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry experts to explore the fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most formative topics and trends that shape the present and future of philanthropy.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Welcome to Untapped Philanthropy. Amber Melanie Smith is a speaker, award-winning nonprofit founder, and social entrepreneur focused on helping people build lives and careers rooted in social change. After a cross-country volunteer journey that took her through more than 20 states, she founded Activate Good, a nonprofit that has since mobilized over 50,000 volunteers across hundreds of causes.

Her work sits at the intersection of service, leadership, and learning, with writing featured in Fast Company and the Philanthropy Journal. She was also appointed by Roy Cooper to the North Carolina Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service. More recently, through her new venture, ChangeKit, she's built a global education platform through YouTube, reaching over a million changemakers with practical guidance on starting and growing nonprofits and social enterprises. I personally have utilized her channel for my own education as well.

In this conversation, it's just me, Tim Sarrantonio, here today for Untapped Philanthropy, and we're excited to explore the arc of her work, what she's learned about participation and peer learning, and where education in the social good sector is actually heading.

Amber, welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yay! So glad to be here.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I'm very excited about this one. Amber, a lot of your work really starts from that lived experience that was mentioned, and that's also very similar to how I approach things. I'm very gonzo in what I like to do. So I'd love to start with that cross-country trip and what that uncovered for you before we get into the more recent things you've been working on.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah, I mean, it was definitely one of those life-transforming journeys, adventures that I think everyone really needs to go on in their, not to age myself, early 20s. To your point, I did not find myself on a linear

career path. I took this road trip in the middle of my college experience to sort of get out there on the ground and see what was going on and how I could make an impact.

Tim Sarrantonio:

So when you were going through that and volunteering across the country, what were some things that surprised you during that journey that others might not think are obvious when thinking about volunteering?

Amber Melanie Smith:

Well, let me take a step back and provide a little bit of context as to why I went on this trip. That's a big question. At that time, I had been volunteering a lot with my best friend and several friends of ours. I'd really fallen in love with a lot of different issues and causes. Prior to that, we were doing all sorts of volunteering. You could imagine: we were building habitats for rescued tigers, we were serving meals at the local men's shelter. We were doing it all. And always wondered, why were all of these causes not just filled to the brim with people wanting to help and raising their hand?

Why was help always in such a deficit and needed? So the road trip was sort of, looking back, you'd almost think of it as a research project. I wanted to answer this question: what is holding people back from volunteering?

And so when me and my best friend, Heather, did this trip together, when we first set out, we had some assumptions that we were going to discover that the answer to our question was going to be that a lot of people just didn't care, that they were apathetic. But what we found through volunteering and through oftentimes just literally asking people on the street, why do you or don't you volunteer? — I mean, this is like street interviews before it was a cool thing on social media — we would learn that people wanted to get involved. They cared. They just felt some barrier or obstacle to getting involved.

There are so many social issues out there. How do you choose? The complexity of it all can be overwhelming. Figuring out how to align your interests and your schedule with the right opportunities that are actually going to be meaningful for causes. These were all of the real answers that we discovered to that question we set out to answer.

Tim Sarrantonio:

First of all, it's funny to think that, one, you're absolutely a much more effective ambassador than potentially Billy on the street would be for this type of thing, just running up and yelling at people. Before I shift into some of the more recent work that you're doing, I was just reading Chiri Koshy's book *Neurogiving*, and there was a chapter specifically on volunteerism. Even if you haven't read the book, folks — or Amber, I'm not even going to put you on the spot on somebody else's content — what he was talking about is the interesting differences in why people might volunteer from a neurology standpoint, that underlying behavior in psychology. If you were going to sum up what you experienced, what motivated people on average, and how much did geography and location actually influence that?

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah, so I'm thinking about your question and how to answer it in a simple way, but there isn't a simple answer. The answer is as complex as human beings are. In some of the research I've done over the past, gosh, decades, years, you find that people are craving a sense of agency. They want to know that their time matters. Just like people want purpose and meaning in their work or their career, they want that in their volunteer time as well.

From a local perspective, the driver to be connected to your local community is very strong, and we find that is also true in how you are influenced to volunteer. We found in recent research — 80% plus of volunteers in one recent study that I've been a part of with Points of Light — showed that their friends influenced them to volunteer. This sort of backs up what we see from the Bureau of Labor Statistics data from years ago that said nearly half of all new volunteers get involved because someone they know invited or asked them to. So that social connection is huge.

But more recently, we're also seeing in this sort of post-COVID world the role of belonging and human connection. People want to find their place. We are possibly more disconnected than ever at the same time as being very connected online, and we're feeling very isolated. So everyone's sort of searching for where they fit, and volunteering can be a great antidote to that feeling.

Tim Sarrantonio:

One of the things that makes me think of, because I think about participation a lot because of my role as the chair of the Fundraising Effectiveness Project, and that only looks at money. But I also think about participation, like you're talking about, extending to volunteerism. So between the research that you've been doing, the work that you did at Activate Good, and now ChangeKit — what gets people to show up, and what keeps them coming back?

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah, it's really interesting. Belonging can get them through the door, helping them feel welcome. Belonging also can help them stay. You are more likely to keep coming back when you feel like you've got friends there, you feel connected to the cause, etc. But there are a couple of other things, too. One of them is this sense that you are learning and growing as a person while you are serving. Calling out and recognizing how you're building new skills, how you are changing your perspectives, meeting new people — all of these things make volunteering a transformative experience that helps people want to keep doing it.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Okay, so if you were going to start to grade us as a sector — and we don't have to put numbers to it, we're not getting into a competitive thing. In fact, I think it's much better to think of this as an ecosystem. Because of that, there are ripple effects. If somebody has a good experience somewhere with one chapter and they go to another organization in a different geographic region, but it's the same nonprofit, they're going to have expectations of that being a good experience there. So where are we doing a good job with volunteers, and where does it feel off that we have room for improvement?

Amber Melanie Smith:

I think you're going to find different experiences at different organizations, but overall, I just want to acknowledge that the whole sector is feeling the strain of — I mean, we always have, but for some reason it feels even worse now. I experienced this too when I was the executive director of Activate Good. Sometimes you just have a feeling like you need to wake up and survive. And when you are in that mindset, when you are on the brink of burnout, it is very hard to think about how you need to have a high-quality, almost customer service–like experience for your volunteers. It is very hard to plan ahead.

When you're feeling like that, it can be hard to get in the mindset that volunteers are a strategic organizational lever. When really integrated into your mission, they can be amazing ambassadors, donors, and advocates for your cause and your issue area.

There are a lot of organizations doing this really, really well. It's the ones who have said volunteers are not an add-on. They're not just people who are saving us money so we don't have to hire staff. They're thinking of volunteers as strategic community engagement partners.

So what does that look like in the real world? It looks like inviting volunteers to be thought leaders with you when designing new programs. It's involving them in leading projects or events. It's creating a pipeline — perhaps through an advisory board or other community group — to potentially become board members for your organization one day. And it's thinking of them as ambassadors into the community, because whether you think of them that way or not, they are. The people who are volunteering for you are the ones who are going to be inviting more people to volunteer or referring you to a potential donor.

So when you think of volunteer engagement as part of your integrated strategy and internally connect them to all the other functions of your organization, then you're going to see volunteers be a great leverage for your organization.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I mean, the way you describe it almost sounds like how we should be treating employees as well. And I know we're going to talk a little bit about the workforce side. I want to touch on the YouTube thing in particular, just because of how much I love it — that's how I was introduced to your work. But before we move on from volunteer elements, I've got two questions for you. Number one: if you had a magic wand to solve something in this current environment, what would it be?

Amber Melanie Smith:

Do you mean magic wand related to volunteerism or the world?

Tim Sarrantonio:

Let's focus on volunteerism specifically — with genies and things, it can get very out of hand if we let scope creep come in.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah — every organization would have their volunteer engagement program fully funded. That's my magic wand wish.

Tim Sarrantonio:

That's a good one. That's a good one. So let's shift into one of the ways that I know you've reached people through your work, which is through YouTube. As somebody who is coming out of working in a dedicated marketing role at a technology company, I have long espoused the importance of YouTube. I have also been baffled at how very little good content there is that is not crappy vendor-driven content, especially given that it is the second largest search engine in the entire world. What brought you to that? How did you get started? And how does that also relate to learning and skill development? Because I know that's the real passion that you have. It's just a channel, but it's one you do very, very well. So I'd love to spend a little bit of time on that.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah, thank you. Gosh, I started my channel five or six years ago now, maybe a little bit longer. What is time? When I first started, it was really in response to getting a lot of questions from people about how do you start and grow a successful nonprofit. What do you do? What does it look like, etc. That was

motivation number one. Motivation number two was: maybe one day my channel would be monetized and I could pay off some of my student loans. Hashtag nonprofit life.

So I started the channel just thinking through how can I share some of my experiences as a nonprofit founder, as a nonprofit executive director — share some of my lessons learned, some of my mistakes, what not to do — and just started creating videos around those questions and those topics. I played with a lot of different topics at first, and people really seemed to start to latch onto the journey of starting and growing a nonprofit.

I was very surprised that anybody was watching at all, that anybody cared. Because when I think of YouTube, I think of like Mr. Beast or gaming channels or fashion channels, and I was none of that. So I really didn't have a sense of were people going to care about this content? But within about six to nine months, I started getting emails from people all over the world asking me more questions, hoping to connect, hoping to learn more. It has been probably the most unexpected part of my journey that I've been through so far.

Tim Sarrantonio:

What's the most surprising outreach or oddest outreach that you've actually gotten because of the channel? Or any weird collaboration requests? How about that? That could be a funny one.

Amber Melanie Smith:

You know, anyone who starts a YouTube channel knows that you start getting very strange brand partnership requests, many of which are not legit. So there's that — warning for anyone trying to do this out there.

Gosh, I don't know if I'd say weird. I've gotten some great speaking requests. I've gone and done day-long succession planning workshops with organizations, and keynotes and workshops as a result of being discovered through YouTube. Emails and very, very nice comments from people in other countries saying, I learned more from your videos than I did in my graduate classes — or, because of your channel, I was able to get this grant. So really, really nice stuff that I wouldn't expect from some videos on YouTube.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Well, especially in my own journey into my thing, I've relied on it very heavily in order to figure out the basics of things. So it's fascinating to see it as a professional development tool — one that has a lot of opportunity in it, but it's just one piece of a much larger puzzle that I know you've been researching. I want to spend some good time focusing on what you've been researching and experiencing specifically: the state of the social good workforce right now. What is the state of the social good workforce, and what do you want to do about it?

Amber Melanie Smith:

I think to bridge YouTube and this question, one of the most interesting things that I've really had reinforced for me through YouTube is the sort of lack of awareness and understanding of how nonprofits and the social impact ecosystem works at all. And secondly, the desire and the hunger to learn more about it. Gosh, I'm sure you've seen this — Candid did a report recently about how people think they've interacted with nonprofits. It was something like only 5% of people think that they've interacted with a nonprofit, but it's really like 70% to 80%.

I think about how obvious this is to people in the sector, but to everyone outside of the sector, we're very, very mysterious. So part of how I see my role on YouTube is as a translator. We can't assume that

people outside of nonprofits and social good know anything about the jargon we use or how it all works. Even when I was years into being a paid executive director in my nonprofit, I would still have people ask me, wait, you do that for a living? How do you get paid? People just don't know.

So through YouTube, I really came to understand that there's an interest in doing this and there's a huge lack of beginner knowledge around it. That has really informed my approach to creating training content, workshops, et cetera, because a lot of the training content I see out there focuses on the upper levels in the organizations — the CEOs, the folks who need maybe executive coaching, et cetera. But what I needed when I was younger was someone to coach me through those beginning parts.

So that's how I approach that. And I think that as we're seeing more and more news and research come out about the challenges we're having with the leadership pipeline in nonprofits and social good work — obviously there are a lot of reasons for it: competitive salaries or lack thereof, burnout, et cetera, all a problem. But one of the problems is that we have failed to build clear pathways into this work. And that's something I'm really interested in and want to help solve.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I'm obsessed with this. I even read a recent Chronicle of Philanthropy article by Alex Daniels on infrastructure, and I still had to go, but where are you putting this? What do you mean by infrastructure? Because I don't think it's anything materially different than when I joined about 20 years ago, when it comes to the clarity of becoming an average community nonprofit professional. 92% of the organizations out there make under a million dollars. We all feel like we've stumbled into the island of misfit toys when it comes to this type of stuff. So I don't want to end on the bummer side — where do you think we can make some immediate progress in, let's say, the next 18 months? And then we'll end with some fun rapid-fire questions.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah, you know, a lot of smart people right now are talking about the critical need for investment — like dollars — in staffing and the capacity building of these organizations. I'm seeing signs that funders are starting to turn their heads at that and pay attention, and hopefully make some of those investments. As this problem becomes more and more visible, we're going to see more tools and hopefully collaboration come about to build that sort of pipeline. And I'm hoping to be a part of that, too.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I know you will be. I know you will be. Amber, what a fun conversation. I know we could go on for so much longer, but we're trying to keep these tight and snappy because people's time is valuable. As a volunteer, as an executive, as somebody trying to make change in the world, I want to be respectful of that.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Absolutely.

Tim Sarrantonio:

So let's get finished with some rapid-fire questions.

Amber Melanie Smith:

I'm ready. Let's do it.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Just go with your gut. Let's start with something kind of nerdy for you and me that we connected on as well. When's the first time you heard about Dungeons and Dragons?

Amber Melanie Smith:

Freshman year of college.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Freshman year of college. Okay. One thing nonprofits need more of right now.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Money.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I was going to say the same thing. Just — no, we don't need more training. No, we don't need more of this. Just give us money.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Also training, but the money too.

Tim Sarrantonio:

But the money too. Yes, all of the — yes and, yes and. A YouTube channel you keep coming back to.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Rocky Kanaka sitting with dogs. He goes and he sits with dogs in the shelter. It's so cute and heartwarming.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Thank you for — maybe we could put that in the show notes, folks. That sounds like a good show notes item. One thing people underestimate about starting a nonprofit.

Amber Melanie Smith:

The cost. People are like, oh, we'll get everything donated.

Tim Sarrantonio:

One word for where learning is headed.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Upward.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Upward. I love it. Oh, Amber, what a fun conversation. We had such a good time learning about the work that you're doing. For folks who are interested in learning more — I know we'll put these in the show notes as well — but where can people head over to and learn about how to work with you, how to read about the things that you're doing, how to find your YouTube channel? What's a good home for all of this?

Amber Melanie Smith:

Yeah, come check me out at changemakercafe.com.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Love it. Love it. Head over there, folks. Amber, thanks for spending some time with us on the Untapped Philanthropy podcast.

Amber Melanie Smith:

Thank you.