

BLAKE UNITED WAY INSIGHT

[00:00:00] Welcome to another insight show on this Reno Media Group station. It's Jaylyn and I'm so excited to be joined by Blake. He's the president and CEO of United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra Blake. Good morning. Good morning. Thank you so much for having me. Of course. So for people who don't know about United Way and all of the amazing things you guys do, give us a snapshot.

Sure. Well, United Way. Uh, is in essence one of the largest and oldest nonprofits in in our country and, and in our community. Uh, we've existed here for over 80 years. Uh, and really our job today is to act as a community problem solver. So, uh, looking at some of the deepest issues in our community that are, that are in essence, um, causing a lot of the symptoms that we see in terms of, um, you know, everything that you see in, in the news.

Uh, drug rates, crime, uh, uh, poverty, everything kind of leads back to several kind of [00:01:00] ingrained, um, issues in our society. So, uh, with the United Way, uh, about a handful of years ago. Our board and volunteers went really across the region to, to have conversations with people just, you know, living their, their, their lives on the streets, um, uh, living their lives, doing their work, and kind of seeing what is it that they're seeing in the community that's, that's stopping us from, from that, that, uh, community that we all wanna live in.

And. For us, it really came down to education, specifically in early literacy, um, early learning. So over the last handful of years, we've really focused in on programming in those realms. So I. One of the first programs that we started, uh, doing here was, uh, supporting Nevada Ready pre-K. So that's the, uh, statewide funded pre-K [00:02:00] services for children whose, uh, families, uh, normally wouldn't be able to afford it.

Uh, we work with private preschool providers to provide those services to those children. Um, and really, you know, there's, there's curriculum involved. There's, they're very high, um, high education models, um, being used there where, um, these kids are really learning things and getting ready for school. So, uh, that was the first program.

The next one was our United Readers Program, which a lot of people have heard us talk about, uh, especially these last few weeks. Uh, this program is, is in essence one of the most successful literacy. And education interventions, uh, that I've ever seen in my 20 plus years. Uh, in, in the nonprofit space last school

year, we were able to serve 643 children from the start of school to the end of school.

Wow. Yeah. That's amazing. [00:03:00] Exactly. Yeah. And, and that's not, that's not just it because you know, a lot of folks. Just talk about the outputs, right? Right. How many kids you serve. But we really like to talk about the outcomes, right. Which is, and where they're leading to through all of this K through 12. Right?

Right. So, you know, the outcome for us is how are they better off? And we have the data to back it up. That showed us that just through that one year for these 643 kiddos, 91% of them, uh, were able to increase their, their literacy, their literacy scores by at least one level. Wow. Which is spectacular.

Absolutely. And on top of that, the average for the whole group was two and a half levels, which is. Also spectacular. Yeah, I was gonna say, that's normally very unheard of, so that's really cool that that's like happening in our area. Right. One of the things I do wanna talk about when you were getting into Nevada Ready in the state, pre-K mm-hmm.

Is a lot of times [00:04:00] we've seen, especially in our area attendance, attendance has been. A huge thing that is starting to lack, and I feel like when you kind of get into these programs, it's something that you can start off really early, especially if you continue them with all of these programs going through until they graduate.

Right, right. So we've been heavily invested in that for several years now. Um, we have a lot of friends who have really been, um, helping us to kind of, uh, kind of move that forward. Um, you know, the, a couple of years ago we. Started, uh, working on that project and we have a website up, we have a bunch of YouTube videos and it all kind of, um, helps to link parents to resources to get their kids, um, uh, in school and prepared for school.

So there, there's a lot of linking over to the various school districts to get, uh, parents to sign their kiddos up for kindergarten and also some resources. [00:05:00] For those parents, um, from the school district and from a lot of our partners, um, who really helped to, um, give them some, uh, uh, best practices to mm-hmm.

To ensure that these kids get to school, you know, and being there is probably the most important thing. Oh, absolutely. Well, I think one of the things too is a

lot of people hear about this stuff and they're just like, well, I don't know if like it suits me or I'm gonna go like the, like regular route. I use that with air quotes.

But I feel like with this in particular, it's so small group space and it's able to kind of get like. That one-on-one attention that I feel like most people don't know that they need until they receive it. Right. Right. Yeah. You know, I think, um, for us, especially with that United Readers program, that one-on-one work, that these, uh, that the mentors that we have, um, work with the kids.

So it's either a one-on-one or, or a lot of times it's small groups. Mm-hmm. Just to try to get as many kids. As possible, but [00:06:00] being able to sit down with them and, you know, really dive deep into, uh, uh, the skills that they need. So, so in this model, it's phonemic awareness. So in essence, uh, uh, the sounds that, um, the sounds that make up various words mm-hmm.

Um, which is in a lot of ways that's. That's how I learned, uh, when I grew up. And that's how a lot of us did too. Yeah, absolutely. Um, but for that, for these kids, a lot of them have not been exposed to that. So when they are, um, there's such a big and drastic change, you know, so many of the teachers get back to us and they say, you know, we saw these kids who were struggling and now.

They're actually, you know, they're sounding out the words, you know, they're doing, there's, there's a, there's a beat involved that they do with their hands, um, that they're, the kids are actually doing it in class and it's making a huge difference. And speaking of United Readers, when you are talking about, you know, the volunteers and all of these things, that's also super important because you can't get any [00:07:00] of.

These programs done without volunteers, and I'm sure that need is super high. Right? Right. Yeah. So volunteers is, is are really the, the backbone for this program. So this program, um, the reason why we've been able to be, you know, both so successful but also, um. So efficient with the funds is that we were utilizing AmeriCorps mentors, uh, in the school.

So they were the actual, um, adults who were sitting with the kids going through the curriculum. Um, that makes it, um, a lot more, uh, uh, fiscally responsible mm-hmm. For our community to be able to do something, something like that. Um. In the past with, with AmeriCorps, we were able to deliver this program at roughly about \$60,000 per school.

So that's to place two AmeriCorps mentors and, um, pay for the curriculum and have the [00:08:00] professional staff who are supervising those, those mentors,

um, working with them on basically a daily basis. Um, that's kind of the formula to get these kinds of numbers right? Absolutely. And it's attainable, you know?

So, and that was something, you know, as we're going into this, that a lot of people were rocked by. You saw this. In the media as far as some things getting cut. I know this is something that is super important, so please touch on that because I've seen this absolutely everywhere. Sure. Yeah. So the, the cuts were widespread.

Um, it was to, in essence about \$400 million worth of programs across our nation. Um, here in Nevada, just for the, the, the, um, uh, the programs within the state. We lost about two thirds of our AmeriCorps Mm, um, support, which is, you know, it's, it's a pretty, it was a pretty sad day and it was pretty jarring because, um, you know, they had been talking [00:09:00] to us.

About moving us up from, um, uh, kind of the, uh, there's a, there's a starting level to AmeriCorps where you're working with the state organizations. Okay. Yeah. And that state organization here is Nevada volunteers, and they had recommended to us to move up to the, um, the headquarters primary AmeriCorps team.

Um. For the, uh, competitive grant that they, they host out of the, the, the headquarters there. And, um, you know, we had, we had everything. We had already kind of pre-submitted a lot of things. We thought we were, everything was, was, was, was going along. Well, we were, we were actually looking at expanding the program by another 10 schools.

Oh wow. And you know, when we got that, that, that news, it was, it was just shocking because. You know, like I said, we have pretty undeniable evidence that this program is successful and we also know that we can deliver at a, you know, I would say a relatively inexpensive level [00:10:00] to our community per school.

Um, yes, it didn't make a lot of sense for it to get cut, but it did. Yeah, and I think one of the things, especially as you're talking about this, is. The foundation of everything. I mean, a lot of times your foundation really does start for reading and math, right? Like you might not sit here and think you use it, but you use it every single day.

Mm-hmm. So now you kind of have to find different ways. To make this work, and I'm sure with all of this going on, that's probably a challenge as well. Sure.

Yeah. You know, we, we recognize that we are in a lot of the same boat that a lot of our friends are in the community. There are many, many organizations.

I mean, just in Reno alone, that, um, relied heavily on federal funding to, um, complete the, the critical work that they're doing. And, um, we also realized that, you know, going out there and seeking funds from, um, [00:11:00] the typical places, the foundations, the private donors, investors, um, now those, all those streams are getting flooded by other organizations.

Mm-hmm. Uh, at the same time, we had always been prepared to move this program to, um, more of a private, public, private funding partnership. Right. Um, it had, it had already been to, in a, in a lot of ways, 'cause we were getting, um, private funds for this as well. Mm-hmm. Um, but to lose this. You know, I think, I think it's a pretty significant chunk of the, of the program, um, means that, uh, it's a lot harder for us to reach those goals that we're, we're hoping for.

And I think with all of the data, like you said, you have this standard, if you will mm-hmm. Of what could happen. And now it's like, okay, like we know we're missing a little bit of this, but we still wanna get. Those amazing numbers. Right, exactly. Uh, and, and that, you know, that's the hard thing because if we can't utilize AmeriCorps [00:12:00] mentors.

Um, the price per mentor in essence doubles. Mm-hmm. You know, we, um, we, we had been, uh, AmeriCorps mentors don't get paid an hourly like, like, like you or I would. Um, but they were getting a living allowance. Oh, wow. And, um, because of our generous donors, uh, we were able to, um, make that living allowance. Um, pretty attainable for, for most folks to be able to, to work this position, um, or, or to, to do this kind of work.

Um, we still want to be able to do that because we don't want to make this something where, um, you know, it's a minimum wage job or somewhere in that, in that ballpark. Mm-hmm. Um, we want to get the highest quality individuals in front of our children. Right. So, for us to do that without AmeriCorp's assistance and the, and the, uh.

The, the education, um, uh, award that they, they also receive at the end. Uh, that means that United Way, um, [00:13:00] has had to, you know, really dig deep to be able to, um, make this thing, you know, still attainable for folks to be able to, to see it as an actual. Um, job and not just, you know, something that they do to tide themselves over for the next thing.

And if someone is listening and they're like, oh my gosh, like I used to be like a teacher and I've been retired for a while, and they're like, that, would, I feel like it would be so amazing to give back. Is that something that could really help you guys and you would want their information about Yeah.

Yeah. That's definite. Um, you know, we have already on the team, we have. Several folks who, uh, are either retired educators or close to it, and they kind of saw this as a great way, um, to, for the retired ones to, to kind of stay in the game and, and, and use their skills to help kids. And for the ones that were close, um, you know, kind of that, that last step before the end of their careers.

I love that. Um, and yeah, you know, it's, it's. It's unlikely that it pays [00:14:00] as much as what they used to get. Mm-hmm. But you know, it's still, you're gonna still get that teacher fell Exactly. Of being able to help. And I was going through your website, you know, learning all about you guys. And one thing that I saw that I love is Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

Yeah. Which is a part of this. And I feel like a lot of people listening are probably like, oh, I've heard of that. And that's pretty much it. So for, for, I mean, that was what I saw. I was like, I've heard this all the time, but I don't really know. What that means in its essence. Can you explain that to people?

Sure. Yeah. Well, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a book gifting program that, uh, the community currently funds to get book, get free, uh, educator approved books to children from, uh, newborn to five years old. Okay. So, um, it's a great way to, in essence. Build a library for each child, uh, [00:15:00] especially those kids whose fa, whose families normally wouldn't be able to afford such things.

Mm-hmm. Uh, the books come to the child in the mail, which is pretty exciting. Oh my gosh. Yeah. It's like a little like surprise package. You're like, what do I get next? Right. So that's really cool. The goal is that we get that level of excite of excitement, which we have countless stories. On from, from, from parents, uh, you know, the kids rushed to the, the, the, the, the mailbox and grab it and they run it back in the house and ask a sibling, uh, or or an adult to read with them.

And that's kind of, that's the dream, right? Absolutely. Is to get kids excited about reading. Yeah. And if someone is listening and they're like, oh my gosh. Like I would love to help out with this. Is there like a donation part to this? Do you go online? Do you have to like, sign up and like. How one particular child, like how does that work?

Yeah. Uh, if people were to go on into our website, www.uws.org, [00:16:00] uh, and hit the donate button, they can actually, um, uh, specify that they want. Their gift to go to the Donnelley Partners Imagination Library. That's amazing. I really like that. And as we, you know, talk about school stuff, and we did mention this a little bit earlier.

Mm-hmm. When it comes to attendance awareness, that is something that I feel like as someone who honestly never missed a day of school, seeing the numbers and hearing people talk about it is so staggering to me, and it is a real issue. What does United Way do? To, you know, make sure we do have students in their seats at school.

Sure. Yeah. So a lot of that, I alluded to some of our partnerships, but I'll, I'll, I'll throw out the, the biggest partnership is with, uh, an organization called Strengthen Our Community. And they've been working very heavily with the school district to figure out how can community organizations, uh, really surround the district [00:17:00] with, uh, um, services, uh, social media and any other kind of, uh, callouts that get the word out to parents to get their kids to school and how important it's, yeah, absolutely.

I think one of the things too, and things that I've seen online is. A lot of times people do start to realize people around them, or you have a son or daughter who's in school and they're like, Hey, like, my friend hasn't been here for the last couple days. And that could be because they don't have a ride.

Mm-hmm. Or like, you know, different siblings or going to different schools, and I feel like it's. So important for people to realize that and help each other out, especially when it comes to attendance, because that's gonna help them later in life, no matter what age they're at right now. Right, right. Yeah, there's so, there are so many contributing factors too.

Uh, um, the absenteeism rates. You know, there, there are a lot of children who are in unhoused situations where we have a lot of our friends who are, are working [00:18:00] with those parents to get, get the transportation they need for those kids to, to stay in school. Um, you know, the school district does an admirable job, uh.

Kind of having to air traffic control almost, almost to the child, really. Mm-hmm. And, um, it's just a dizzying array of circumstances to get these kids there. Yeah. And it really is a community effort, you know, not just one organization can do it by, by themselves. And, and this is kind of the core with United Way is, you know, we really act as.

Both a, a convener and facilitator of organizations coming together to do the, you know, to solve a problem together. Right. 'cause we know that typically you see the problem. Yeah. Yeah. And, and when you work together as an entire community to solve a problem, you typically get more results than if it's just one organization or another, kind of doing their thing in their own silos.

Um, so that's why we believe so heavily in, in, in, in that kind of work. And, and [00:19:00] when we're not the one convening or facilitating, we're certainly a willing partner such as, um, what strengthen our communities and the school district. I love that. And another thing you guys do, I feel like I'm one of those people who you hear about United Way, Northern Nevada, and then Sierra, but then you.

Start, you know, diving deep into conversations like this or the website. You guys also have an EMO emergency Food and shelter program? Sure, yeah. Yeah. So the EFSP is a federally funded, um, program where we partner with various agencies who are delivering just like, just like you heard. Mm-hmm. Um, either food or sheltering services.

Um, across our communities. Uh, that one has been in place for, gosh, decades at this point. Um, ever since I've, I've been a part of United Way, which is, which is over 23 years. Oh, wow. We've been working with the FSP, with the federal government, um, to, to get those funds out. Uh, and it really is, you [00:20:00] know, it, these are, this is the safety net.

This is, um, you don't hear a lot about it. But you, you definitely feel it in our communities because most times when you, um, uh, either yourself or a friend, a family member or someone you run into is having a problem like that, they are typically touched by many of these core agencies. Right. And if someone knows.

Someone who's going through something, it's safe to say that they could lead that person into United Way's direction to get the help that they need. Yeah. Um, they could, I think, I think a a, a faster way to help them would probably be for them to call 2 1 1. Mm-hmm. So that's the, the statewide, uh, calling number.

They also have a website, uh, but 2 1 1 is in essence the number that people can call to give or receive help. So, um, that's probably the fastest because they are information referral specialists. Okay. So, you know, you could [00:21:00] come with a whole bunch of different, um, issues that you're, you're seeing in your life or somebody else is seeing.

And they will be able to pop it into a system and then, um, uh, information will come out in terms of which agencies are actively serving that need. I love that. Yeah. And we had talked about, you know, volunteering and, you know, being an advocate, especially, you know, you see someone like we had talked about who.

Isn't in your classroom all the time for the attendance, or you're like, Hey, like you want to read a bunch of stuff? We have stuff for you. But one thing you guys also do is family health festivals. Mm-hmm. And I feel like that is so important in our, in our community. Yeah. Yeah. But family health festivals are very interesting.

Um, that is another coalition that, uh, we started out, um, facilitating and we, we continue to help them along the way. Uh, it's a conglomeration of different agencies that, um, you know, are, are dealing with the various. Uh, social determinants of health in our community and [00:22:00] providing services. So these, these festivals are a great way for us to be able to bring in, um, as many of those agencies into the same room so that, uh, people can go and, uh, get connected with them right there instead of having to, to, to seek them out over the course of, of a day.

Yeah. And is that something where if people head on over to your website. And they click it, they'd be able to see like a calendar. I would assume. They don't just happen, you know, once a year. I bet there's a ton of them that are actually going on. Right, right, right. Uh, so the, the, the soonest one is, and then, well, I'll get you that information later here, but, um, they, we have them all on our website.

Okay. And there, there should be one coming up here in a little while. I love that. So one of the things that you had said, which was going to lead into my next question, I was gonna ask how long you've been with United Way, but you had said 23 years. In 23 years, you have seen. So much as far as these [00:23:00] programs and how they've expanded and other things going on, what would you say would be the best part about working for United Way?

And I know that's probably a very hard question 'cause you have seen a lot and been around a lot of people. Yeah. Well, you know, I think, I think the best thing that I see as with being a part of United Way is how dynamic the organization has become, uh, here, here in the northern Nevada area. Uh, we really took a, um, a different approach to kind of the traditional community chess that most United Ways are.

Um, where in essence we really focused in on that early learning, um, literacy model, uh, because we knew that that was the place where we could have the most success. And because our partners were telling us that, uh, there was room for, uh, for, for new programming mm-hmm. To take place. So I think that's something that's.

Been critical too for my career. Yeah. Um, with United Ways that. I never want us to just come [00:24:00] and plant a flag and say, everybody must follow us. Mm-hmm. We, our job is really to lift all boats, you know? Absolutely. I care about all of the different programs. I don't see any of them. I. Any other nonprofit As a competitor, I see them all as partners.

Mm-hmm. And my job is to find the places where United Way can be the greatest value add to the work that everybody is doing. And I think that's a great way to say it because I think a lot of times people are like, oh, well if I'm gonna do one thing, I have to go with this organization. And it's like, but if you're all a part of a puzzle and you're each a different piece, like this could be the piece that you need to make.

Your things easier, like you were talking about with my Nevada 2 1 1, right. Like they, you could literally text 'em. They will give you all of the information. Mm-hmm. And it could be one of many different things that I feel like is so important, especially when you're dealing with young children or, you know, uh, attendance [00:25:00] awareness.

And especially with the United Readers. I mean, that doesn't just come from you guys. That's, yeah. People coming together for one, you know, big cause. Right, right. Yeah. I mean, uh, and I think, I think it's been very similar with the Dolly, with Dolly Partners Imagination Library. Um, United Way does not consider itself to be, you know, whatever you want to call it.

The, the, the so provider or owner of the program. It really is a team effort across, yeah. Um, a, uh, a group of 17 organizations that make up the Northern Nevada Reading Coalition. Uh, so when we, we started to think about expanding the program, we actually asked all of them for their buy-in to make sure that it wouldn't get in anybody's way.

Right. Um, and that it would be, like I was saying earlier, a value add to the work that they're doing. Uh, they agreed and then we went forth and sought funding for it. The, the state legislature and the governor were, um, very gracious in helping [00:26:00] us with the initial push for that. We're, we're hoping that we can do it again, um, for these next couple of years.

And when we launched it, we took great pains to make sure that everybody knew that this is a reading coalition program and United Way. Is United Way administering it for, for the coalition on behalf of them. And we're, we're raising the funds for it. Um, but it really is owned by our entire community. I love that.

Yeah. That's really cool. And now when we were talking about Dolly Park's Imagination Library earlier, you did say that there were some amazing stories as far as like kids being super excited. Can you share one story that like sticks out to you about how important this program really is? Sure. Yeah. Um, well, I've got.

A couple, you know, we hear all the stories from the parents, you know, like I was saying earlier, of the kids running and grabbing the books. We've heard, um, countless stories in terms of, uh, siblings, you know, having their own [00:27:00] libraries. And then, uh, uh. You know, they have a younger sibling who enters the library and they start to read to that, that their, their little siblings.

That is so sweet. Yeah, that's, I mean, that, that fills your heart. Absolutely. Um, we also have data too, so we're working with. The Department of Education to get some more longitudinal data. And this, this all goes back to what I was talking about earlier with the United Way, being very focused on outcomes rightly rather than Absolutely.

Rather than just outputs so important. So we're working with them to figure out how we can get some outcomes and be able to show the community. If children were in the library, how successful were they when they got to kindergarten and beyond? Yeah. And I think that's so important too, like what you were saying, for the sake of.

You wanna do more when you're excited about it. Right. And if you know that like, hey, like every week or so, or how, you know, however that works with the Imagination Library, that you have something to look forward to. Mm-hmm. And then you can share it with people. [00:28:00] That feeling is undeniable. Yeah. I mean, exactly.

You know, in, in the last community that I worked in, we had this program as well, and we ran it. We ran some numbers with that school district and they were seeing. Between 30 to 60% better kindergarten readiness scores, uh, for kids who had been in the program for just a couple of years versus their peers.

Wow. I love that. I expect that we'll have pretty similar numbers here in, in Nevada once we're able to get 'em. That's amazing. Like if people wanna learn more information about United Way, all the amazing things you do and possibly. Be able to volunteer or be a part of everything you guys do? What is the best place to do that?

Yeah, I think it would be our website, so www.uwns.org. Uh, it'll show you everything that you need to get involved. I love it. Blake, thank you so much for joining me this morning. Learning all about United Way, and thank you so much for joining us on another insight show on this Reno Media Group station.