

Modern Life – Episode 12 – Charity – Chad Houser

Title: Purpose Through Charity | Chad Houser | Fidelity Modern Life

Transcript:

Chad Houser: We need to rethink the way that we've viewed charity across the board. People look at donating money and don't think about having a return on their investment, and they should. We are literally returning money back to our community in multiple forms.

Jamila Souffrant: Chad Houser. Thank you so much for joining me on this episode of Modern Life to talk about charity.

Chad: Thank you for having me. It's quite an honor to be here.

Jamila: So Chad can you take me back and tell me exactly what Cafe Momentum is and why you started it?

Chad: Well, Cafe Momentum is a six-and-a-half-year-old restaurant in Dallas and we've been consistently ranked as one of the top restaurants in the city since the day we opened. And we take a lot of pride in that because our restaurant is entirely staffed by juvenile offenders. So in addition to being an award-winning restaurant, we're a 12-month paid post-release internship program for young men and women exiting Dallas county juvenile detention facilities. In addition to working through the restaurant, learning life skills and social skills and all of the stations, applying them to all of the stations in the restaurant.

We also have a community services center with a case management team, staff, psychologist, career services coordinator, and even an education manager that oversees our very own high school.

Jamila: Tell me a little bit about your journey to falling in love with food and having that as your career.

Chad: I always loved to cook and my love for cooking comes from going to my grandparent's house every Sunday for Sunday supper. All my aunts, uncles, cousins, my mom, my dad, myself, we all gathered on Sundays and broke bread together. And so food meant a lot more to me than just eating, it was about family.

Fast forward to going to college and I had no idea what I wanted my career pursuits to be. But I knew that I was supposed to graduate college and build a career. So I told my parents that I was going to major in English literature and get my degree as required. And then I was going to try cooking because I loved cooking and it was a passion for me.

So I went to culinary school with one goal in mind, and that was to one day own my own restaurant and be the chef of that restaurant. And approximately 10 years later, I did it.

Sold my house, took all the equity out of it to get a loan, and bought into a restaurant in Dallas and became co-owner and chef.

Jamila: And tell me about from that experience of having your own restaurant to then creating Cafe Momentum, what was the thing that allowed you or made you make this leap or transition into the non-profit and charity world?

Chad: About a year into ownership, I had been nominated as best up and coming chef in Dallas. I had grown the business by almost 40%. It was right at the one-year mark of ownership that I was volunteered to go teach eight young men inside a Dallas county juvenile detention facility to make ice cream for an ice cream competition at the Dallas farmer's market.

And speaking very candidly, the moment that I met these eight young men, I felt the greatest sense of shame I've ever felt in my life. Because it was the moment I met them that I realized I had stereotyped them before I ever met them, and I was wrong. And for me, I thought I was a better person.

My running joke is that all eight of them looked me in the eye and called me "Sir" the moment they met me, and 25 years of cooking in kitchens, I've been called a lot of names and in lot of languages, a lot of kitchens, just never, "Sir." But that shame led to humility and that humility led me to spend the next several hours, not so much teaching them to make ice cream, but more importantly listening to them tell me who they really were, how they really were and why they really were.

And two days later, the county bussed these eight young men down to the farmer's market and they were competing against college culinary students. And one of them actually won the whole competition. And when he won, he was so excited. He's screaming at me, "Sir, I just love to cook!" and I'm screaming back at him, "Sir, me too!"

And then he said to me the greatest statement I've ever heard a human being say, as he looked right at me and said, "I just love to make food and give it to people and put a smile on their face." And then he said, "When I get out, I'm going to get a job in a restaurant."

And then I started thinking about his story, the fact that he's going to go back to the same house in the same street, the same neighborhood, the same school, the same poverty, the same traumas that he had had experienced. I became self-reflective and thinking about myself at 16 years old and him at 16 years old and quickly came to the realization that for both of us, our lives were dictated by choices that were made for us before we were born.

Whether it be because of the color of our skin, the socioeconomic class we were born in, the part of town that we're born in, the school's resources we had access to. I had never done a single thing in my life to earn the resources and opportunities that I had been provided. And maybe even more importantly, I had never done anything to earn the ability to fail and for the community and society to pick me back up and give me a second chance. And conversely, for this young man, he had never done anything in his life from

birth on to not have those resources, to not have access, to not be provided with opportunity.

And so I just spent more time volunteering inside the juvenile department and most importantly listening. And you hear the staff talk a lot about consistency and stability, and you hear the young people talking a lot about their need for consistency and stability. And so that was where the initial idea for Cafe Momentum came about. "How can I do something with my skills to provide that consistent and stable environment for them?"

Jamila: I mean, that's so powerful and you recognizing your privilege in that moment and not, you know, being defensive or running from it, obviously had such a big impact. When did the idea come for Cafe Momentum that you wanted to also create something else that could help really give them leverage and just better opportunities?

Chad: I had this idea to open a nonprofit restaurant, for lack of better terms, taking kids out of jail and teaching them to play with knives and fire. And as you can imagine, the community does not take well to this idea. One of the first things that someone asked me was what was my plan for when the kids started stabbing each other in the kitchen? I was repeatedly told those kids don't want to work. They just want to collect a check. I was consistently told that those kids have never been to a nice restaurant. They can't cook your food.

So while understanding that the restaurant had to be bigger than just a job, that it had to be an accumulation of resources for these young people, I also had to simultaneously educate the community that they're wrong. And if you actually knew these young people, you would never say these things about them. So in order to do that in, in June of 2011, I launched a series of monthly pop-up dinners and the idea behind the pop-ups was very simple: go in one of the top restaurants in Dallas on a Sunday night when they're closed, sell tickets to a private dinner, have the chef write a four-course menu, but the staff not only helping the chef in the kitchen, but serving it to the level and quality of service of that restaurant were eight young people that we would bus in from a local juvenile detention facility. And speaking if I'm honest, the first dinner, the goal was to get 50 people to pay \$50 to show up. And having zero confidence that anybody would show up, I was like devising plans to call my mom and have her guilt the ladies in our Bible study class into buying tickets, just so like anybody would show up.

However, with minimal announcement, the dinner sold out in less than 24 hours and every single person that attended that first dinner before they left, they walked right by me, looked me in the face and said, "You know, this could be my son."

And I realized in that moment that it was a success because the community, when forced to actually face these young people and see them for who they truly are, could no longer make those negative stereotypes, but actually acknowledge how awesome these young people are.

Jamila: And now, I mean, your restaurant is thriving, and people go there also to enjoy the food. Now you're serving 150 to 200 kids throughout this program a year. Is that true?

Chad: Yes, ma'am, it is. And it's a great point because that's one of the things that we want the guest to see as something as simple as a wonderful meal can actually change the trajectory of our city's most marginalized and at-risk youth.

Jamila: Chad, how would you define charity in a modern way for people to think about?

Chad: I think we need to rethink the way that we've viewed charity across the board. And I think one of the things that that I've learned is we have this very skewed sense of philanthropy kind of across the board. People look at donating money and don't think about having a return on their investment and they should because you know, I can unequivocally tell you that we are literally returning money back to our community in multiple forms. Just from buying produce from local farms and ranches, we're taking our money and putting it back into the community. But as well, if you look at things like recidivism and how we've drastically reduced the recidivism rate for youth in Dallas county, we've saved Dallas taxpayers over \$40 million since we opened this restaurant. By helping young people find a different path and allowing them to walk a better path and seek their true potential in life.

Jamila: So a lot of people assume that they need to work hard, have money first, a lot of money possibly, and then donate. How would you want someone to rethink that?

Chad: Yeah, I would want them to think just the exact opposite. Donations are twofold. It's not just the amount of money that you're giving. It's the message that you're sending to the organization.

At Cafe Momentum, for example, our young people, our staff see a donation as a validation for the work that we're doing a validation for the work that our team is pouring into the young people that we serve, and a validation to the young people that they should keep going and keep moving.

The second part of that as well is there's this misnomer that organizations are built with large sums of money when in fact it's the exact opposite. And if you ask anyone that runs an organization, would you rather have a thousand hundred dollar donors or a \$1 million donor, you'd rather have a thousand hundred dollar donors because if you lose one or two, you still have a majority of your income and allowing you to do your work coming in. If you lose your \$1 million donor you're done.

So I can't think of a single non-profit organization in this country that I've come across that was built on million-dollar checks but was more built on 50 and 25 and a hundred-dollar donations.

Jamila: I love how you frame that. And if more people thought of it that way it could encourage them to get more into this type of work. How can someone listening who wants to do more, how can they find what it is that they're supposed to be doing and how they can impact their communities?

Chad: There are people in every city across the country that are doing tremendous work and I would say, just put yourself out there, you know, volunteer show up, listen, and lean in. Just be a fly on the wall for them. You would be surprised at how many non-profit organizations can really use opportunities for free labor. And it's an opportunity for you to lean in and listen. And I think that that's most important too, is walk humble and do a lot of listening.

Jamila: That's wonderful. Part of, I believe, the just small light from the pandemic has been this focus on social justice issues. We're in like this unique space in time where more people are feeling called to do more. What if they want to create something like a Café Momentum or maybe the next person that can invest in it? What for them is the next step that they should take to make that a reality?

Chad: Gosh, you're asking a very risk tolerant person, so I would just say do it, you know, go all in. Don't overthink. Don't let yourself be the barrier to doing something important or something special.

And enter at whatever level feels comfortable for you. If you want to launch your own nonprofit organization, go for it. Start it. Do it. Just give yourself grace to know that it's not going to be perfect. It's going to be messy and you're going to learn and you're going to adapt and you're going to adjust.

If you want to volunteer, go volunteer. There's no wrong answer. And I think that we get in our own heads too often to think of, "Oh but what if I do this? And it doesn't work. What if I do this? And it doesn't work." You have to think of working with one young person as one ray of light. And if you enter a dark room and you project one ray of light, it shines a finite point on the wall.

And then when you add a second light it shines another finite point on the wall, but by the time you get to the 10th light, all of a sudden, the energy of the lights are working together. The room is much brighter with 10 individual lights working together than it is with 10 separate beams working solely on their own. And so if you just focus one at a time, one step in front, the other one young person at a time, you're going to build those 10 lights and all of a sudden, the room's going to light up.

Jamila: I love that. So what is next for Cafe Momentum? What do you have in the works? What can we look forward to seeing?

Chad: We've garnered a lot of interest around the country of people saying, how do I start a Cafe Momentum in my own city and so we've actually launched a new organization called Momentum Advisory collective that's overseeing our expansion efforts. Our goal is to expand to 30 markets over the next 10 years, starting with Nashville, Tennessee, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania this year. But more importantly, our goal is to show that the ecosystem of support that we build around young people, that should be the new model for juvenile justice around the country.

At Cafe Momentum in Dallas we're working with 150 to 200 youth a year. And working with 150 to 200 youth a year in individual markets is significant except I kept going back to the number 728,000. That's the number of young people that enter the juvenile systems across the country every year.

And so working with young people is great, but where the real impact is going to happen is when we can begin to talk about the way the juvenile justice system works in this country and actually change the way the system works.

And so building these programs, what we're really doing is sending a message that we are the new model for juvenile justice. We are the way the system should work. And when we can begin to build our ecosystem of support into the juvenile justice model, then we can begin to affect 728,000 lives.

Jamila: Chad, please, tell everyone where they can find more about what you're doing and donate and support the cause.

Chad: Please, if you would like to donate, go to CafeMomentum.org, you can even learn more about our program. You can see our menu, and if you would like to see and are interested in our expansion efforts you can go to MomentumAdvisory.co, and read about the work that we're doing at momentum advisory to launch programs around the country, including Pittsburgh and Nashville this year.

Jamila: Thank you so much, Chad, for coming on modern life and talking more about charity and philanthropy. This has been very inspiring and insightful.

Chad: Thank you very much for having me. It's quite an honor. And I just can't reiterate this enough, but what you've done today is not just let me blab on for a while. But what you've done is you've told the kids that they matter by allowing us to talk about this issue. They're going to listen. They're going to hear and they're going to know that, that this country cares about them. So thank you. Thanks so much for that.

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