

United Way of Salt Lake
Speaker Series: Building Equitable Communities
Jim Shelton: Power of Place
March 11, 2021

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Transcriber: LMC

[Music playing.]

Bill Crim: Good afternoon, and welcome to the 2021 United Way of Salt Lake Speaker series: Building Equitable Communities. I wanted to take a minute before welcoming our guests to thank our generous sponsors for this year's event.

We are grateful to Salt Lake Community College for being this year's presenting sponsor.

AT&T is our major sponsor, Comcast is a supporting sponsor, and Rocky Mountain Power is our community sponsor.

This is our fourth year doing a Speakers' Series on Racial Equity. It's long been the core work of United Way of Salt Lake to address inequities in education, health, and economic outcomes that exist in our communities. It's long been our work to convene outcomes-focused, cross-sector partnerships. The speaker series is one way we can learn together and act together.

Thank you for joining us. Please note we have closed caption available for today's event. I'd like to take a moment to recognize the land we're on. It's a part of the work for equity. This land is the traditional territory of the Eastern Shoshone and Goshute peoples. We want to honor those who have stewarded this land and acknowledge a need to address continued inequities experienced by indigenous peoples.

We will now hear from Deneece Huftalin, President of Salt Lake Community College.

She has been doing great work and has been a champion for equity work. We'd love for you to hear from her now.

[Video playing.]

[End video.]

Bill Crim: We are so grateful for Deneece and the partnership of Salt Lake Community College working with us on this project.

We're also incredibly grateful to have with us today Jim Shelton, Chief Investment and Impact Officer of Blue Meridian Partners. Jim is a national leader in the work to address racial inequities – with a career that includes work in the private sector, philanthropy, and the US

Department of Education, where he was the founding director of My Brother's Keeper and led the development of the Promise Neighborhoods initiative.

We'll learn more about this. Jim, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

Please address your questions in the Q&A box. We'll try to get to as many of those questions as we can.

Jim, welcome. To get started, tell us about the Blue Meridian Partners initiative.

Jim Shelton: Sure. Blue Meridian Partners starts with a fundamental belief that to any given social problem, there are solutions. Sometimes you haven't found the resources yet, but once you find them, you have to get to the people that need them.

Finding the solution is inadequate. You have to get that to the people that need them, and you need to stack supports on top of each other, from the time an individual is a child through adulthood.

The closer you are to where they live, the more it matters to you how it turns out. So, our work is meant to take people on a trajectory in our communities to improve their lives.

We're hoping to create the next hundred communities who want to do this work.

Bill Crim: Let's have you tell us about yourself and what drew you to this work.

Jim Shelton: Sure. I'm here with you tonight from Washington, D.C. I'm from the part of D.C. where people tell you not to go. I had the good fortune of going to my school outside of my own community. In the 3rd grade, I was helping my friend's brother with his homework. I realized that he was getting a different opportunity than I was.

I wanted to go into education, and one of the things that happened along the way was I benchmarked equity work around the country. There are no silver bullets. There are ways to help people along that pathway we talked about, and also help people along in environments that lead them to thrive. That has led me to this work long term.

Bill Crim: Two things you were instrumental in developing are now national initiatives that are taking root across the country: the Promise Neighborhoods Program and My Brother's Keeper. Can you talk about those and where you see them going in the future?

Jim Shelton: Sure. I can only take credit on executing a vision that was created before me. President Obama, Angela Blackwell and others did a great job of advancing the work of that administration.

Think about the recovery act in 2008, 2009. There was a big push then to not just stimulate the economy directly, but to take care of these problems long term. Harlem was one example of a neighborhood that was hard hit. Doing evidence-based practices all through someone's life could lead them to a successful adulthood, but it took a strong partnership to be able to do that.

We wanted to use data that spread outcomes throughout someone's life. Most importantly, we didn't do it alone. So that was that program.

My Brother's Keeper was borne out of a tragedy. President Obama said that Travon Martin could have very easily been his son. He came out and asked, how do we change? It was in the context of My Brother's Keeper that I could say, if you want to value people, you can't value them just at one point in their life. You have to value them throughout their life. You have to find ways to intervene that would matter for this specific population.

Once you disaggregate the data and figure out what's going on for boys of color, you start to figure out what's going on for everyone. All of us need to be able to read, and graduate high school, etc. But we start to get hit with obstacles at different points. Once we address the inequity in our systems, you can address those inequities for everyone.

I was very proud to do that work in the administration, the policy work that benefits all children, and the work outside of the administration.

Bill Crim: It's not coincidental that the same infrastructure exists in both programs.

Jim Shelton: People will start to realize that I'm a one-trick pony. The research is very clear. The same milestones for kids still matter. We need to get them what they need.

Research has discussed this Bloom's 2 Sigma Problem. An education researcher asked a very simple question: if you give a young person a healthy environment and support, how far could they go? What is the potential of the child?

This experiment, where he worked on that versus a regular classroom, famously became known as the 2 Sigma Problem. He had an average student performing at the same level as a 95th-percentile student.

But, how do we provide children with one-to-one tutors? Since he's done that research, we know that it's almost exclusively never the child. We now know we can do this. The question is, will we be creative, generous, and courageous enough to give them what they need.

Bill Crim: Some might hear this and say, we need more programs. Only. But what you're talking about seems like a more collective choice about the programs themselves. What role does public policy have in all this?

Jim Shelton: Sure. There are milestones in someone's life, and there are supports that work. So how do you adopt and scale those things, and how do you get the compounding benefits of someone going from one support to the next? How do you actually help people organize so you have a system of continuous improvement? Very few programs actually get to that performance level I was talking about.

Our schools can't do this work alone. So there is the work in saying, "what does work?" What are the best practices? But, if you don't have systems to plug those solutions into, we'll never be able to serve all our kids well. So we need both.

Bill Crim: You've seen a lot of communities doing this work. You probably know more about this than anyone I've ever met. What does it take to be successful at what you're describing?

Jim Shelton: I'll say with all humility, I don't fully know because our aspiration is something that we've not seen. Our aspiration is that we serve every single child well. We're still figuring out how to do that. I do know that some communities are making progress in that, and they share things in common.

Those common things are that they agree this matters to them, and they pursue that work. They also have the data. They pursue that data. They have hard conversation about what's working and what's not, what will get resourced and what won't. They also have conversations about the hard issues of inequity and race that are difficult for people to have, and until recently, masked more than embraced.

The last thing I'll say is that they have great leaders. Great systems and strategies are great, but great leaders make those possible.

Bill Crim: Until recently many of these inequities have been masked for some people. They've been visible to many, but masked to many. This last year has unmasked that in a way that's been quite remarkable. Talk to us about how you see this moment in time, both in terms of challenge and opportunity. And maybe let's think about it in terms of racial equity awareness, and racial reckoning. And, in terms of economic recovery and inclusive recovery. There's a unique moment here.

Jim Shelton: Yeah. The reality is, we had in 2020 the Band-Aid pulled off a wound that's been festering for a long time. A lot of people say, wow, I can't believe it's been there all this time and I didn't recognize it. It's powerful and important and it's mobilized people. But I think that many people still don't realize that below that wound that's exposed on the surface, there's an infection that is running deep in the body of our country. It infects all our systems. We live with it every day, so you forget it's there. We have learned behaviors we don't recognize we have. We have biases that we'd argue we don't have. And that is the hard work that we have still to do, is to say, there's a viscerally appalling, dramatic, racist violence that we see that drew out people last summer.

But deep in almost all of our systems in America are long-standing biases that keep people in place.

I won't bore with a chart, but I have a chart from the 1930s in Chicago. It was a map drawn. It was for people to deploy mortgages to stimulate the economy. I have on that very same chart a map of Chicago today. It shows economic mobility data. It shows what economic mobility looks like down to the census tract level.

There's a chart that's red, from the redlining time, and there's a place marked red in the current chart that is almost identical, where there still isn't economic mobility.

These are still existing, and they're immoral. We need to find pathways to get to those ideals we aspire to.

Bill Crim: What do you see happening where that reckoning leads to productive action? Where do you see hope around the actual work to dismantle?

Jim Shelton: Yeah. I see it on multiple levels, actually. I'll talk about these folks doing place-based work around the country. It would be very easy for folks to focus their time on Black and Brown children to get on their high horses and say, we've been in this all along. But I ask people to take a deeper look and ask, have we actually shifted our mentality? Have we actually shifted things in the communities we serve? Do we have a policy agenda that starts to peel away those things that are designed to keep the status quo the way it is, or are we just intervening to do some work on top of it?

Are we really hearing the challenges of the people we serve? Seeing people engage and hold themselves accountable to doing something different -- that's exciting to me. The resources that companies have committed; I'll be excited when I see things move. I'm curious to see when we look 3 years back, how much money have actually landed in those communities and what difference it made.

Bill Crim: It seems prescient that Blue Meridian Partners anticipated this moment, before the pandemic, anticipated the recovery moment where there would be choices. Where mayors, city councils, and government would have choices about what do with recovery choices. I'll just mention the investments that Blue Meridian has made all over the country are changing the conversation with civic leaders about what the future would look like.

Jim Shelton: I would hope so. The reality is that when we started this, we accelerated our timetable because of COVID, without any indication of what was to come. Our core plan, at its center, was to unpack where the inequity was in the systems you described. That was a part of the conversation. We bring to the table voices from the community. That was one of the things we asked for very directly.

Think about luck and idiot in this context. They do say that luck is when preparation meets opportunity. What is true is that we were working at a scale that could not have anticipated what was about to happen. Unprecedented resources are going to land. \$1.9 trillion is about to be dispersed. The question is, what will we do with it that will not only fill gaps for today, but will build long-term equity in the future?

Bill Crim: Yes. I can ensure you that mayors and civic leaders here in the Salt Lake region have connected those dots. In an inclusive recovery strategy meeting yesterday, they were discussing about those resources and discussing shifting power and changing systems.

Jim Shelton: That's great. We need example artists. We need people to show what it looks like, and if you do it, you turn out with different outcomes. I'm grateful that you and other leaders are setting that example and we can illuminate other folks around the country.

Bill Crim: We're excited. I want to turn to the questions in the Q&A section, but let me ask you first, is there anything else you want to mention that's important for this work in the Salt Lake region?

Jim Shelton: There's something that I want everyone around the country to focus on. It's March. School will restart in August in most places in the country, largely in person. Lots of energy has been put into opening school safely, physically. Not a lot of work has been put into what are all the things young people will need to be successful when they return? There's a lot of conversation about academic learning laws. But what do we need to do to engage students, how do we identify the other supports they need before we get them to do more math or more reading? How do we support families? How do we not do what we always do, which is become insular and turn to ourselves to get it done?

I know it's cliché to say, "all hands on deck," but it is an all-hands-on-deck moment. I know that if we focus, it'll matter for years and years to come.

Bill Crim: That's a super powerful reminder. One of the challenges we've noticed is that schools, for a variety of reasons, feel under the gun, and have even before the pandemic. Perhaps so much so that it's hard to take an all-hands-on-deck approach. Intellectually, I think everyone gets that approach. But it's worth building some all-hands-on-deck strategies because it feels like the fires burning right now are too hot. Do you see that in other places?

Jim Shelton: I see that all over. The reality is, school districts are all under pressure: to deal with issues that are undiagnosed, to catch kids up when they're behind -- we hold schools accountable for many things. I want to be very clear about that, because if we want a different outcome, we need to change the context in which people are trying to do their work, too.

Secondly, communities often don't organize themselves to take support relatively easily. I have no doubt that things in Salt Lake City are like lots of cities. There are hundreds of nonprofits and companies that want to do things. But to ask a school system to receive all of those apparatus is

a big ask. The partnerships that you set up ought to kick in. It ought to be easy for a school to say, "while we get our kids ready academically, integrating new services, you need to provide other services." If you can provide those support services, I think school districts will be glad to take it. If we see some schools do it, others will follow, because trust is hard to come by.

Bill Crim: I want to turn to these Q&A questions. "My Brother's Keeper -- I heard you talking a lot about centering Black men and boys in your initiatives. Many Black queer feminists have called for gender and race to be equally centered when thinking about any social issue. How do you think about gender and intersectionality in education?"

Jim Shelton: One of the things we were trying to do is say, there's a concept called partner universalism. If you focus on the population's needs, and you focus on how to design those needs, do you actually design services that serve everyone better?

The second thing is, we haven't been desegregating data across any of those levels. Before My Brother's Keeper, you could only look at data by race and by gender (binary gender), not even across race and gender.

So, how do you ultimately drive these students and what are the steps along the way? My Brother's Keeper focus on boys of color because that was the population that really needed those resources. But these tools can be used to bolster up any disenfranchised population. We can identify the differences in any population type and recognize that there are a range of identities within any population that need to be address as well.

Bill Crim: Awesome. Here's the next question. How do you shift power to communities authentically? How do you avoid doing that poorly or in a performative way?

Jim Shelton: We all have a lot to learn about what that looks like. But here's what I'll say. There's community input. You have meetings and people tell you what they think. There's community engagement, where people are involved in design processes. Then there's empowerment, where people are actively involved in decision-making. The way you know that a community does have power is that their vision of their community is what their community actually looks like.

Some people think that means, all the answers are in the community and all you have to do is give them the resources and get out of the way. In my background, there's a thing called human-centered design. The idea is that yes, no one knows better than you what your problems are, what job you're trying to do, and you will always have creative ideas about how to do it. But there's a reason why there are engineers. They provide an expertise as well. There's exposure to others that do that similar kind of thing. It's by bringing those two things together that you can craft solutions that neither one of you would come up on your own.

So, yes, communities know best, but you should engage in a communal way to decide on the best solution possible.

Bill Crim: Yes. What you've described is essentially a lightning rod. How do we correct one another, and work with one another, without further alienating one another?

Jim Shelton: Easy questions tonight. [Sarcastic.]

Bill Crim: We have sharp ones in here.

Jim Shelton: I'll talk about people I know who consider themselves conservative. Let's take a place like Dallas. A couple places in Texas voted overwhelmingly republican, and they supported the last president.

But, they also had an equivalent of the Dreamer's Act decades before the Dreamers Act. So, the reality that . . . my point in this is, Dallas is not the most liberal city in Texas. It's relatively conservative. Dallas looked at their city and asked, where have we historically deliberately underinvested? And they passed a bond to fill in some of those gaps.

All of that rhetoric, where if people started talking through their labels, they would have been at war, you had people in communities creating opportunities at the same time.

The more we focus on our children, the more we say, every human ought to be born healthy, and they ought to have resources to take care of them in their early stages of life -- that's something we can all agree that we want for our children. Sometimes, we don't have to fight about what "good" looks like. And we work on those things.

Bill Crim: Let's go back to school. "Can you give an example of the type of thing you'd like to see schools/district DO as students return to schools? Is it start a week early and just reconnect with kids? Is it summer programming?" What's the ideal?

Jim Shelton: The short answer is, yes.

The reality is that reengagement is a thing. Reaching out to families, kids, especially the kids who we know have been disconnected or have struggled through this period, getting them resources, and getting them diagnostic assessments -- not only their academic status, but emotionally and socially. Do they need supports? This is a traumatic time for people. How do we understand what's going on in a young person's household so we know what supports they need?

This summer is about reaching out. It's about relationships that form real connections as these kids transition back to school. Ask them what their supports are and what they need to be successful.

I can't emphasize enough how important engagement -- not just connection -- is during this period to get these kids impressing themselves academically.

Lastly, integrating into the school environments the social and emotional supports to kids, as well as accelerated learning opportunities for tutoring and things like that. If a school hasn't already adopted a strategy, they ought to look at that too.

Bill Crim: This might be too specific of a question. But do you see any school districts saying, we can't have a summer. We need to go year-round.

Jim Shelton: I have seen folks add a month. We're starting to see people say, we actually just need to rethink what we're doing. We're learning that this hybrid thing can work better than we thought.

I won't say the name of the organization, but there's an organization where most of their curriculum resources online. They get to track what's going on. They found there's a lot of heterogeneity. They found that the similarities of progress were happening in schools that were committed to ensuring success -- like if you're not online for a day, we're calling your house. That kind of rigor paid off.

Now the question is, what did we learn about how that can look in school? How do we integrate other support services?

There was a recent study released on Monday showing the impact of tutoring, and how it paid off. You're able to move kids the equivalent of 2+ years in a year. Those are the things we need to create the environment for kids to feel like they belong.

Bill Crim: Yes. We have a pilot program that blends in-person tutorship with online instruction.

Let's get back to another system question. "How do you disrupt inequitable systems even as you work within--and are funded by--them?"

Jim Shelton: Yeah. Again, these are all easy questions. [Sarcasm.]

I had this conversation last week. It's a funny thing, where you're a younger person until you aren't. There was this whole conversation about trying not to center the current power structures. The reality is, there are certain things I don't have to like, but they still are. The truth is, resources and power still sit in many systems, and we need to figure out how to bend them to our will. We also need out kids to learn how to take advantage of imperfect systems. But, never ever give up on creating the perfect system.

So, the idea of designing something new starts with the notion that every kid can reach their highest potential, you need to center in difference to clearly make those outcomes. One way to make sure you're actually addressing the different categories of intersectionality is serving each child. When you can serve each child, those categories become less important. You no longer

say, "how do I serve Black straight boys?" You say, "how do I serve Byron," who happens to be, but is a lot of other things too. Then we can help each child reach their full potential.

Bill Crim: That powerful idea of serving the needs of each child and differentiating instruction seems well-embraced and seems hard to do from within the system. Utah has the lowest per-pupil funding. We do a great job here. I don't want to suggest that our schools don't do well with that. But we do have larger-than-average class sizes.

I'm curious if you've seen examples where teacher training programs, or other ways of helping teachers embrace that vision, if they don't already have it, and then be able to do it?

Jim Shelton: Yeah. I've been fortunate that prior to leaning into this work, I've done work in education. I've seen models where schools are focusing on that intention. You design around the needs of the kid to produce outcomes.

There's a school focused on the emotional needs of kids. Or, there's a school focusing on agency to provide personalized pathways for kids.

It's interesting to talk about these new school models, but if you look at the theories of Piaget or Montessori, it's about taking kids from the beginning to the end. Somehow, we've lost those systems. And sometimes, in the name of being fair or just, we don't fulfill the needs of kids and we lump them altogether, not serving them particularly well.

Bill Crim: I wonder if we could move into the higher education space. How should post-secondary education be thinking about this same challenge of coming out of a pandemic and transitioning kids from a senior year of high school which was not what anybody expected?

Jim Shelton: I'm smiling because I'm a father of a graduating senior, who has largely been locked up in the house for the last 18 months.

Imagine what they'll be like when they show up on campus for the first time, with that freedom, after being locked up for 18 months. Parents have scary thoughts about those rites of passage that usually happen in their junior and senior years of high school might not have happened, and they'll instead happen for those kids away from home.

Those kids will need a little more structure and support when they arrive than we're used to providing. Secondly, I don't think any of us really realize the level of trauma that has arisen from this. It's important to have strong counseling resources on campus, so when the stresses of being away from home show up, and it's amplified by the other traumas they're already bringing, it's important to have those addressed.

There will be a lot of variable learning experiences that the senior classes will have had entering their college years. The scaffolding that they need to be successful needs to be there.

I say because I'm mostly worried about my son. But we also need to recognize is that we've allowed our post-secondary to do three things that are really challenging.

1, there's a path where there's at least transparency about whether kids are graduating, whether they're employed, and whether they can pay their debt. That transparency can help parents make decisions about schools. We've gotten away from that, and we need to get back to that.

2, we've allowed the cost of education to get to the point where even if you access it, you're burdened with debt that still makes it prohibitive, and you're making it more difficult for people to go up the economic ladder.

3, we've continued to believe that the way we were doing post-secondary three, four, five decades ago is still how we should do it today. But the truth is, we need innovation at the post-secondary level. It's at least as much innovation needed as the K-12 level. We're still in the 30% dropout rate for post-secondary schools. We must tie it together better to people's lives.

Bill Crim: That's a powerful way to end this. I want to ask one final question. That wasn't the end, but . . .

I feel enormously better-prepared to go about this work by virtue of this conversation. But it is about work, it's not a conversation here. This is learning. And the next is doing.

Give us one thing that you'd advise us all to do as we go act on what we're learning.

Jim Shelton: Go together. Go together. If you leave this webinar and you just go back to what you're doing, and you don't think, "There's no way for us to do what we're wanting to do for our kids," then we won't have change. So, go together.

Bill Crim: Thank you. I want to thank everyone who has joined us for this webinar, and the other speaker series events, and to those of you who join us in the work. Please visit our website and connect with us. We wish you all a very safe and excellent evening.

Jim Shelton: Good night, guys.

Bill Crim: Take care.

[End of event.]