

Doing What Works: Innovations in Homeless Services Episode 9 Patricia Kusaba

Title: Episode 9: One Tragedy Away: Overcoming Homelessness and Finding Purpose with SMC Graduate Patricia Kusaba

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SPEAKERS

Host: Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins

Guest: Patricia Kusaba

[00:00] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Welcome to Doing What Works, Innovations in Homeless Services, the podcast that takes a closer look at one of our community's most urgent challenges. I'm your host, Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins, Interim Associate Dean at Santa Monica College's Center for Media and Design. Each episode, we'll engage with experts, policymakers, and educators to uncover the history, explore effective policies, and highlight the efforts of those working to create change. Joining us on the podcast today is someone we're very excited to interview. We've already heard from one student from Santa Monica College.

[00:30] college's inaugural cohort in its homeless services certificate program. And now we're spending a little time with a second one. This student has now completed her coursework in the program and earned a certificate in homeless services. She's here today to share her experiences in the program and the very personal experiences that have led her to want to explore a career in homeless services. Patricia Kusaba, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Patricia Kusaba: Oh, thank you for having me. I'm really happy to be here.

[00:58] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins :** So listen, our first question for every one of our Doing What Works podcast guests is always the same. What was your first job and how does what you learned in that position inform Doing What Works for you in your current role as a student in SMC's Homeless Services program?

Patricia Kusaba:I loved my first job. It was in the mall. It was an ice cream and juice shop called Dairy Queen Orange Julius.

And I learned that loving what you do matters and what you eat matters, too, because I had plenty of ice cream there to keep me there for a while. So now I'm looking for later in life. I've had several jobs, but the ones that stick are the ones that I have a passion for, which is why.

[01:43] **Patricia Kusaba:** I'm here today.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Did you learn how to do the little twist?

Patricia Kusaba: Oh, yeah. I used to make the cones and dip them in the chocolate. There's a timing to it, actually.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Oh, my goodness. We'll have to talk later about that. Let's talk about your background a little bit. It's been a challenging road for you, really. There's been ups. There's been downs that you likely just didn't anticipate. Can you tell me about what life was like even growing up?

[02:09] **Patricia Kusaba:**I think the most...difficult part of my childhood was the feeling of loneliness and displacement. My family moved around a lot because my dad worked for a growing nonprofit. So we constantly moved and I was losing friends almost every year. And so I never really had a place that I called home for very long. And not having friends was a big deal, especially when you're a child and teenager. I believe I carry that into adulthood as well.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: So it must have been, you know, a weird place to feel alone as a child.

[02:54] Right. You said that that comes up often even now. What do you mean by that?

Patricia Kusaba: Well, when I'm in a new space and I am the only person there alone, like I don't have any friends there with me, I get very intimidated. I start feeling like I'm a child alone and that I don't belong and I don't have friends and a

feeling of unworthiness comes across me.

[03:22] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** I know that there was a time when you yourself were homeless. Can you share with me that moment when you realized that things were headed in a direction that you didn't really like? And also, what was that experience like for you?

Patricia Kusaba: Now, that's really interesting because I didn't realize that I was homeless.

[03:43] or the state I was in until I became healthier and I recovered and I was placed in housing that was stable. At the time, I was just surviving. And I thought I was just a normal person, even though I was extremely frail, under 100 pounds. And I...

[04:08] I was walking around with a cart and a dog and I would be approached by people wanting to give me money. And it just didn't occur to me that I looked homeless, but I was living in my car.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Can you tell me what kind of led to where you had to live in your car? What were kind of the experiences and the moments that led to the point where you felt like that was an option that you had to explore?

[04:37] **Patricia Kusaba:** Even now, I believe that many people are just a crisis or a few away from being homeless or a tragedy that leads to or situations that lead to being homeless. And I had a lot of people in my life who had passed away. I lost my dog. I lost my job. It was during COVID. And I did not have any coping skills. I didn't have a solid...

[05:06] group of people who I turned to support me. So I quickly just turned to drugs and alcohol to cope. And with that, with mental illnesses that were undiagnosed, I quickly found myself in a place where I was even imagining that I was being chased by gangsters. And I was just...

[05:35] I was walking around my house and on the ground thinking people were watching me and just living in paranoia. And it was just, it really was a bad state of mind that I was in.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: This wasn't a situation where you graduated from high school and then you just found yourself on the streets. You went to college, you had a career, you had a family. Can you talk to me about those things?

[06:05] **Patricia Kusaba:** At the time that I was homeless, didn't realize that I was because I had so many accomplishments. I had gone to Berkeley in a field that was ranked number one at the time, I think even now. And I had gone so many jobs. I had

worked in the Silicon Valley. I had out of college had my own office and I was hiring people as a supervisor and controlling stuff in the U.S. And so with all the achievements,

[06:34] it didn't seem possible that I could ever be homeless, even when I was.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: I think that's an important thing for folks to recognize. Right. I think many people have a vision of what someone who is homeless looks like or what they've been through. But that's not necessarily always the case. There's a lot of assumptions. Right. So from what you experience, what should people know about homelessness and about...

[07:02] that time that people find themselves in their lives without a consistent home. Because you yourself said, I never imagined this. I didn't even realize I was homeless until someone reached out to me.

Patricia Kusaba: Yeah, you just never know the person next to you who could be smiling and looks totally fine, has a happy belly like I do now. And they could be homeless too. They could be a student living in their car or they could have...

[07:31] an unstable household where they're constantly getting kicked out for no reason or whatever it may be. Like I said before, I think that people are just... one tragedy away or maybe a few situations away from being homeless and it doesn't mean that they they they don't always smell um they could be living in their car and getting showers somehow and they they have clothes and shoes they don't look like what you see on the streets and they won't tell you because they're embarrassed or they don't feel safe to do so but through my profession I have had people open up to me and...

[08:11] they look like ordinary people, you would have never guessed.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Let's talk a little bit about the professional side of things. Can you tell me how you first learned about SMC's Homeless Services Program and why you were so drawn to it?

Patricia Kusaba: My recovery process involved getting mental health services, and I went to DMH

[08:31] clinic, and I still go there. It's been about two, three years, and I formed relationships, strong bonds with the supervisors and group leaders, and one of them referred me to this program. She had gotten an email about this program, and she knew that it's something I was strongly interested in, so that started the process of me ending up here.

[08:56] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** How important was it for you to be able to go through this process, get the certificate, and then work in this particular field?

Patricia Kusaba: It was extremely important. I would say it was even more nerve-wracking than when I first went to Berkeley, which intimidated me at the time. I had imposter syndrome for a while.

[09:19] Coming to school at SMC was the first time in a decade I had gone to school or to any kind of professional setting. And I was extremely intimidated and wondering if I was even capable because I had gone so low in my life. I didn't know if I was the same person, if I could still do it.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: What was that first day of class like when you walked into that classroom? You see the teachers, you see the other other classmates. How was that for you?

[09:46] **Patricia Kusaba :** It was definitely nerve-wracking, but that quickly went away because I could tell that everyone was genuine. They had good intentions. The staff at SMC were very joyful and kind, and the instructors were as well, and I could tell that it would be a warm and comfortable environment to learn in.

[10:15] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Let's talk about the courses. Did you have a favorite course out of all of the ones that you took while you were in the program? And if so, what made that an impactful course to you that you kind of always are drawn to and remember?

Patricia Kusaba: My favorite course is called Implementing Effective Practices in the Homeless Response System. It's the final course that we take. And in it, we were able to learn from experts in the field.

[10:44]: and the experiences of individuals who are formerly unhoused. And I really enjoy learning from those types of experiences and work in the field rather than learning theories. And I think that was one of the most important parts of this program.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: I'm sure it was also easy for you to be able to connect, right, because of the experiences that you had

[11:12] : finding that kind of shared common ground with the folks that you were engaging with.

Patricia Kusaba: Yes, I thought it was very brave of them to come and share their story. And most importantly, I felt pride and encouragement from seeing that

they were able to overcome and are currently living stable lives. And I was also...

[11:39] very much encouraged by my instructor who played a part in the process of getting them on their feet and stable again.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: What do you feel worked really well in the program that you went through here at Santa Monica College? What are some things that stuck out to you as kind of successes of how the program was run?

Patricia Kusaba: I enjoyed that.

[12:04] the people who had created the curriculum and the staff at SMC played a huge part. They would come by and sit in class. They would interact with us. And it made us feel like we were part of the growth of the program as well. And they were always asking how they could improve and how the program could accommodate us.

[12:29] Of course, the teachers made a huge difference. They were very down-to-earth, and at the same time, experts in the field with decades of experience. They were working during the time of the AIDS epidemic, and it was just an honor to have them as our instructors. And I really enjoyed the students and how we helped each other in the program.

[12:58] And anytime life got hard, the instructors and the students would come together to help one another.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: You mentioned that they would often solicit kind of feedback from you about what could be improved. What do you think could be improved with the program if it were offered again?

Patricia Kusaba: I would have enjoyed more fieldwork experience, doing outreach, volunteering.

[13:22] And also more time to do trainings online through LASA's website. There is a myriad of videos and resources on there open to the public. And I find that that would have been very useful early on, but I'm glad that they share the resources nonetheless.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: You mentioned earlier about, you know, kind of the friendships that you forged with your classmates. Can we talk about how important that was and what that process was like and how those relationships helped you go through the program and complete it?

Patricia Kusaba: Yes, it was a two-year program and I'm glad that we, in the end, we...

[14:07] really did respect one another and cared about our growth and learning. And if anyone couldn't make it, there would be someone who would help. Like there was this one instance where we had guest speaker and one of the students couldn't attend and so another streamed her question live so that it could be answered and so that was just kind of the environment that we had amongst each other is that we wanted to make sure that all of us stayed in the program.

[14:39] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Are these friendships that you feel like you're going to have for the rest of your life? Do you all still keep in contact, stay in touch?

Patricia Kusaba: I certainly hope so. I always hope that someday I'll run into them again or in the field that we'll work with one another or counter one another. We are working on a toolkit that was part of our final project. It's a collection of resources.

[15:07] a Google document. And through that, I'm hoping that we can continue to contribute and connect with each other.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: I'm sure in this work, you know, it's not easy work. It can be challenging. It can be taxing. So I'm sure having a network of folks that you met while going through a challenging program and continuing to have those relationships is going to help as you kind of enter into the industry.

[15:34] Can you tell me, now that you have the certificate, and I'm sure looking back while you were in it, it probably felt like it was dragging. But now that you look back, it probably felt like it was a blink, right? What do you hope to do now that you have this certificate in hand? What's next for you?

Patricia Kusaba: I want to continue working on this toolkit because I think it would benefit not just people who...

[16:00] are unhoused, but people who may be getting to that point as a point of prevention and even people who are just looking for resources, mental health resources, resources for parents, for housing, for anything related legal. I basically kind of anything that I need, I put into that toolkit. And so I'm hoping that that would be.

[16:28] there would be the next cohort that could add to that as well and take it to the next level. And it could be a living document. I also am volunteering right now at the same place that I interned. And I can't work all the hours that I

want to right now, but I know that someday I'll be working in the field, whether it's in the agency I'm at right now or another one.

[16:57] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** Does that feel kind of like a full circle moment for you, given where you've been and how far you've come and where you are now?

Patricia Kusaba: Yes, strangely, I would have never thought that I would be in this field. It wasn't even, sadly, it's not even.

[17:17] on those tests that determine what career path you take. I don't think I remember seeing this one on there. But if it were, maybe I would have definitely considered it, which is why I'm glad SMC has this program.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: What would you tell someone who is considering applying for this next cohort coming up for the Homeless Services Program who might be a little on the fence? What would you say to them?

Patricia Kusaba: I would encourage them to

[17:46] join, to put in an application. I would also ask them what concerns they have. Maybe I could address them and then figure out why it is that they want to go into this field. And if they have some anxiety about succeeding. I would share my experiences of success in the program, and I would share what I gained from the program, and just that there is so much support from the instructors and SMC staff, and even beyond, that if they actually want to do it, they will succeed.

[18:25] **Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins:** What did you gain from the program? You just mentioned that that's something that you would share with someone who is considering applying for the program. What would be kind of your takeaway? If you had to have a couple of words to describe what your experience was and what you got from the program, what would that be?

Patricia Kusaba: It solved a long-held problem that I had figuring out

[18:52] how I could help the people I see on the streets. I've always had a desire to help, and I didn't know how, and it tormented me. And so the instructors were really able to share with me the ways in which they help people, so many people every day. And so now when I see people,

[19:21] with tents or walking with carts or whatever it may be, I feel more hopeful. And I stop most of the people I see. I stop them and ask, is there anything I can do to help? And now I have resources and I know exactly how I can help. And so that gives me a sense of empowerment and not just that humanity.

And I don't think.

[19:48] I've gained that from any other program I've been in.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Why is this program so important and how critical is it that the program exists at other community colleges throughout California and even across the country? You mentioned a little bit about what it's given to you and that idea that I now am empowered because I know how to help. How critical are programs like these?

Patricia Kusaba: Oh, it's extremely important.

[20:16] I think that apathy is rampant especially towards the unhoused and homeless there's prejudice assumptions against them and this generation and this world needs more understanding it needs to teach humanity in whatever field a student is in i think that's a central part of

[20:44] having joy and success in life. So I would encourage any college or institution to implement a program such as this one.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: After everything that you've been through, the bouts of homelessness, but even the successes that you have in your life, you know, going to Berkeley, graduating, having your own business, doing all of these things, going through this program, getting that certificate, how proud are you of yourself?

[21:11] **Patricia Kusaba:** I am very proud when I think of where I was and where I am. It took time and resources and many people who took their time to give to me their wisdom and kindness. And without that structure and stability and love, I could not have.

[21:37] survived it all.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: I feel like it's important to say that you, though, did the work.

Patricia Kusaba: I appreciate that. I was part of the process. I tend to forget that.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Nothing happens without you.

Patricia Kusaba: Thank you.

Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Patricia Kassaba, thank you so much for coming on the podcast today and sharing your journey with us. And thank you for joining us on Doing What Works

Innovations in Homeless Services. We hope today's conversation has shed light on the complexities of homelessness.

[22:06] inspired ideas for change. If you found value in this episode, please subscribe, share, and leave us a review. Together, we can continue the dialogue and support the efforts to create lasting solutions. Stay tuned for more insights from the experts leading the way. Until next time.