

The Intersection of Faith, Homelessness, and Addiction

Transcription

Alyssa Rodriguez: Welcome to Built By Us, a podcast created by Democracy North Carolina, a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to building a political system that works for all. My name is Alyssa Rodriguez. I'm your host and in this episode Taylor and I are in Winston Salem talking with the triad interns. We sat down to talk about a vulnerable population in Winston Salem and about how civic engagement doesn't always look the same for everyone. This conversation taught us a lot about how faith communities organize around social justice issues and how we as organizations can help as well. I hope you all can learn something just like I did.

Nazia Witherspoon: I'm Nazia. I'm from Winston Salem and I'm a rising junior at North Carolina A&T State University. I got started with Democracy North Carolina because of my older sister who just recently graduated from Winston Salem State. She is an intern with progress North Carolina and she would take me with her to like the meetings and the little organizational things that they would go to and I was never really involved with political things. I was more of like mental health and racial equity, but I was like, man, this is important. People should know about this. So she told me about Democracy North Carolina summer internship, she told me to apply and I did. And now I'm here.

Khayla Miller: My name is Khayla and I am a rising senior at Winston Salem State University and I'm from Salisbury North Carolina. My aunt who introduced me to all this, told me about the internship and I applied and when I came to the interview, I honestly just fell in love with the people because I don't know, they were so warm and welcoming, what they was talking about, I could relate to and I wanted to spread the message, I wanted to do what they were doing. So once we started can just went off from there. I've been learning ever since and I really have had a good experience so far.

Tyler Walker: So I got involved with Democracy NC, because I was in class arguing with everybody about values of money and politics and that got me my teacher was like you should join this political group and and I did. And then he also said, you know, it's also really cool Democracy North Carolina does basically the same thing but more, and it's in North Carolina and said, sure, I'll send my application in. And then two years later I finally got it. Yeah, no--

Tyler Walker: All summer long we'd been working with churches, organizations, ministries, all sorts of faith based outreach. And when we were thinking of doing the podcast, we were racking our brain. We were like, okay, we don't want to talk to any more politicians. We don't want to talk to just any old body wanting to think of somebody who's really out here doing the hard work. But we also want to do something slightly newer than what we've already been doing. We've talked

to a lot of, um, people older than 55 who go to church all day long. They seem to really like going and getting out involved, but they're a little bit easier to get out to the polls. So Ms Linda came up with the idea. She said, you know what? You should talk to some people down at Samaritan ministries. And I was thinking, that's a great idea. And so that day, Nazia and Khayla went out and they want to talk to somebody here. And that's how we ended up getting the interview. So, unfortunately we haven't been doing a lot of voter access outreach with the homeless population, but we did learn from the Mayor that that's actually a really big thing here in Winston-Salem over his tenure, he reduced homelessness by 90% he said. So it's been a real big focus here in Winston-Salem. And when you think about it that way, people who have a house and have a comfortable job, they get the chance to worry about who's going to be governing them. So, you know, I guess it's the step before you get into politics, you know, helping you get your life together. So I think it's a perfect podcast idea.

Alyssa Rodriguez: We actually got a chance to sit down with Shontae and this is what that conversation sounded like.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So Shontae, thank you so much for being here today. Do you want to tell us a little bit about what you do and who you are?

Shontae Fleming: Okay, well I'm Shontae Fleming. I am the assistant director at Samaritan Ministries. Samaritan ministries is a homeless shelter for men and we also have a soup kitchen for anyone in the community and we have a long term substance abuse program in house.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And what do you spend most of your time as assistant director doing?

Shontae Fleming: Well, most of my time I'm monitoring our charts, our records. I do a lot of that. I do supervise some staff here such as the shelter manager, maintenance staff, and the guy that's over our substance abuse program. So I do supervise him. A lot of it is interacting with the guests, putting out fires, de-escalating. So it's a variety of things that I do.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So Shontae, I'm curious what Samaritan ministries' relationship with the community is like.

Shontae Fleming: As far as in the community, I do attend the meetings for the, I'm like Samaritan's representative as far as the community meetings. So we do have several meetings in which we all come together. All shelters, housing case managers, United way, City of Winston-Salem. So I am kind of the representative for Samaritan that attends, me and the Executive Director. She's also a part of that collaboration and we do collaborate with a lot of other agencies to house homeless individuals.

Taylor Moss: So with the folks staying here, do you ever hear any conversations about civil rights?

Shontae Fleming: I can't say that I hear a lot of conversations about that. A lot of people are just trying to get housed or find out where they're going to go next. Trying to self resolve, try to find employment. That's kind of what I hear. I don't really hear a lot about civil rights and things like that. They're trying to work on solutions to their current situations and and make some changes. So that's kind of what I hear. What's my next step? Where am I going to go when I leave here? You know I get 90 days here. Then we have a lot of untreated substance abuse and mental illness, so they may not stay here long so they leave, may come back and we got to go through this case review and try to figure out, okay, your time is up here, but maybe we can refer you to the next place. So, I don't hear a lot about, like I said, civil rights. They're trying to work on solutions to their current situations.

Taylor Moss: It sounds like they just don't have the opportunity or the chance to even think about things like civil rights and voting because they're so focused on their next steps and getting their lives where they want it to be.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Does Samaritan ministries have any programs that focus on voting or getting people to the polls?

Shontae Fleming: Well, we do have people that come and they just want to stand outside and register people. We may let them come and set up a table, register people. I know in the past, our previous assistant director would take the guys that are in the substance abuse program. He would take them to vote, so I'm kind of new in this position. I just started in January so I have not had that opportunity, but I'll be glad to continue that.

Taylor Moss: Do your residents use Samaritan ministries as their address on voter registration forms?

Shontae Fleming: Mhm.

Taylor Moss: Have there ever been any complications with that?

Shontae Fleming: No. The only complication I can think of is if they leave here without a, maybe a forwarding address we'll still get their mail, but we'll just have to send it back to the post office. But other than that there are no, no problems that I know of.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Well I'm glad because that makes the process much easier for everyone. I also know that Samaritan ministries has a substance abuse program. I'm curious to what that looks like.

Shontae Fleming: So I use to do that program prior to me becoming the assistant director, so I can tell you a lot about that program, but it is 12 to 14 months long. It is an in-house program, so like they get to stay in during the day, our other shelter guests they have to leave out, you know at 7:30 they have to check out. But these guys stay in because they're doing groups, they're

doing case management, they're doing individual sessions with their counselor. They're networking with other people in the community. They have a sponsor, they go to AA meetings. They also get connected to things like goodwill and vocational rehab. So they're going to their appointments through those programs as well. So, so that is a separate dorm. They stay in a separate dorm. Then the shelter guests do.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Do y'all offer any other programs?

Shontae Fleming: Well, what we also have in house, we have the empowerment project. They're housed here as well and that is case management for severe mental illness. They help with housing. They help with things like getting a payee, they help connecting to other resources. So we have that. They're located in house here, but they're separate from Samaritan, but they do utilize our space. Then on Thursdays we have United Health Centers that come and do a clinic on Thursday and that's pretty much from nine to four o'clock anyone could come to that clinic. You can just walk in. So those are the things that we kind of have in house right now. So space is limited, but that's what we have housed right now in house.

Alyssa Rodriguez: I feel like a lot of people may minimize the work that Samaritan ministries does in the community for this vulnerable population. How would you tell people that it's important for places like this to exist? Especially in Winston-Salem?

Shontae Fleming: Well, we serve anywhere from 200 to 400 people daily lunch. So we see all ages, all races come in, you see children in the summertime, you know when school is out. So I would say that's definitely important. Another thing during our overflow season, we definitely try to accommodate. We don't want anyone want to freeze. So we we our normal shelter stay, I would say it's 90 days, but during overflow the shelters, they may be six months because we definitely, we try to to bring in as many as we can and keep them here from December 1 through March 31st so I would say that's definitely important and we're definitely trying to house people. We're trying to end chronic homelessness. That's a part of Winston-Salem's initiative to end chronic homelessness, that 10 year program. So we're definitely a part of that. We collaborate with them as well.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So you mentioned how homelessness fits into Winston Salem's 10 year plan. How does Samaritan ministries, if at all, work with the city of Winston Salem?

Shontae Fleming: So it is attending the meetings that we have, which there's probably about two or three meetings that we have a month that we have to kind of go to and I can give input about guests that I know that are staying here. I can just kind of figure out who their case manager is. I can stay connected to that particular guest. I can make sure we have our paperwork good on their end to help the case managers. So that's pretty much our role. We just collaborate. I don't necessarily find housing units. We have pals and case managers that do that through United way and other agencies such as Experiment and Self Reliance. But I do kind of sit on the team to let them know, okay, this guest has been at Samaritan for 90 days. We'll give them an

extension, but I need to know where he's at as far as getting an apartment. I may express concerns this person, you know, maybe their motivation is not quite where it needs to be. I'm concerned they may not stay in their apartment. You know just things like that case by case.

Taylor Moss: So is the city creating ways to fix this issue?

Shontae Fleming: I almost got a combination of trying to find some units, trying to work with existing landlords that we've been working with. I think it's a combination of all of it. Yeah.

Taylor Moss: So Shontae, what do you think is the best way for groups like democracy, NC to be working with this community and helping them?

Shontae Fleming: Well you might want to educate them as to the importance as to, you know, why they need to be involved and active. Because that's something that we don't necessarily focus on cause we're housing first, so it may be good for groups like yourself to come in and maybe educate individuals about it.

Taylor Moss: Do you think your community would be interested in groups like us coming and talk to them?

Shontae Fleming: Honestly, I don't see it as a priority but some, because again, they're trying to figure out where they're going to go next. We get a lot of guys that are dropped off from the hospital and coming out of they want a job that's, you know, I can see it maybe eventually being a priority, but priority is pretty much their basic needs being met first.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And Shontae what do you hope for Samaritan Ministries' future? What are some goals or outcomes that you hope to be seeing in the next coming years

Shontae Fleming: I hope to see a lot more guys getting housed. Sometimes we do see some repeaters kind of cycling back through the shelter maybe six months later, a year later, maybe four years later. So I would like to see everybody that comes through the shelter getting house. I don't know if that's unrealistic, but that's something that I would like to see number one and I would like to see any needs that they have to be addressed.

Taylor Moss: So I think we learned a valuable lesson from talking with Shontae at Samaritan ministries and that's that this population of folks without homes and folks who are in treatment centers are generally just overlooked when it comes to the political process. And that seems to be just because they just don't have a traditional address.

Alyssa Rodriguez: But in reality they kind of do because when they registered to vote, they just use the address of wherever they're staying at the time.

Taylor Moss: That's right. Shontae said that's totally fine to use if you're in a rehab facility, some other treatment center or a shelter that it's totally fine to use those addresses.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And so I think a lot of people have trouble kind of relating to this, this population in a lot of ways, but I feel like in reality we're really not that different. We're all just trying to get ourselves on the right track and get our lives right in the place where we want them to be.

Taylor Moss: Yeah. And so groups like Dem NC and other, uh, voter registration and education, uh, groups should be working with these populations more because it's easy enough to go register them and we just educate them on the issues just like we would anyone else because they're gonna have opinions once they learn about what's going on.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And so these people are worrying about so many things that are going on in their lives and society and just different issues that they may be encountering. And they should also have the opportunity to elect representatives and politicians that are supporting populations like them too.

Taylor Moss: I guess what we're trying to say is that these populations shouldn't be overlooked anymore just because they're trying to figure out where their next meal is coming from, doesn't mean that they don't care enough about what's happening on city council in all honesty city council could be deciding what happens to the local food pantry, how much money gets allocated, and how much staff is working there. So really their issues intersect a lot. So we should be making sure that we're helping these folks get out there and vote.

Alyssa Rodriguez: So if you ever find yourself in Winston Salem, Taylor, and I encourage you to look up Samaritan Ministries' and get involved in whatever way you can.

Taylor Moss: Yeah.

Alyssa Rodriguez: And it's been so great being here in the triad. Thank you everyone for joining me today and for sharing your experiences and teaching Taylor and I something.

Nazia Witherspoon: We hope you join us in creating a North Carolina Built By Us.

Khayla Miller: And thanks for listening to this podcast made Of, By, and For the people.

Alyssa Rodriguez: Connect with us on social media. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @democracync or you can visit our website at democracync.org.