

## Something Extra EP 023 – Orv Kimbrough

**Lisa Nichols:** Orv, thank you so much for agreeing to be on the podcast today, I'm just so excited for our listening audience to hear your story and I've known you now for several years, through United Way and our work there and just admire you and respect you as a leader and as a friend. And I'm excited for our listening audience to get to know you a little more.

**Orv Kimbrough:** I'm excited to be here, Lisa, thanks for the invite.

**Nichols:** Absolutely, so let's just jump right in. We've got a lot of things to talk about. Talk to us a little bit, Orv about what it was like growing up for you.

**Kimbrough:** So, I was born in the early '1970s, and East St. Louis which is just across the river and what was then and still is, now one of the most challenging and devastating parts of our region. I was born to a mother who she was an only child. We moved to the St. Louis area, just across the river before I turned five years old, and my mom was a single mom. I didn't know my dad, I grew up in North city, which much like East St. Louis. Was challenged in and it's still challenge today. My mother died when I was eight years old, and she really was a product of her environment. I remember one morning when I was 8, I woke up because I was hungry and I went over to the refrigerator to see what there was to eat only to find a box of crackers, so I went over to my mom who was asleep in the other room to ask her if I could eat the crackers. Food was hard to come by in our home, so I learned to ask for anything I wanted to eat. It was really my mother's way of inventory control, I began to shake my mother and she didn't respond, I continued to shake her and still, there was no response when the paramedics arrived, they pronounced her dead. That began more than two-decade long journey in the state foster care system.

**Nichols:** I'm just thinking about where you were and where you are today. And my heart breaks for children that are in that situation. And I know that had to be hard but you know, I'm sure... Orv you could talk about some lessons that made you stronger. You are probably a stronger person. How did you navigate that first? Was there someone that took you in? How did you, after that happened with your mom? What happened next?

**Kimbrough:** After mom's death, we moved in with a cousin. So you recall I said... My mom was an only child, so we moved in with a distant cousin, who we didn't know well and that situation was a tough situation. We ended up staying in that home for five, six, seven years. And this woman at the time, she was in her maybe late 50s she didn't have any kids and she was taking care of her mom, who was in her 70s and now all of a sudden she has four kids, and it was an incredibly stressful environment, for her, I suppose, is as well as for us. And it was a challenging environment. But you make it through the challenges.

**Nichols:** Did you and your siblings really become closer and stick together. You guys were each other, support probably.

**Kimbrough:** I think initially we did that, we were each other's support. I have three siblings, a younger sister, younger brother, older brother. And from that foster home, we moved into residential care, and that's really where we started to come apart at the seams because we were all placed in different facilities and so you didn't have an environment that nurtured family connections and relationships. And that truly extends itself to today, that formative period in our teen years, where we were separated, informs our relationship even to this day.

**Nichols:** Well, I did talk about belief, and I just believe that every person needs somebody to believe in them. And were any of the foster families that you stayed with, did anyone speak into you... Was anyone a mentor? You don't even have to talk about that if there's other people along the way who have been mentors or people that have spoken words of life into you.

**Kimbrough:** So, I didn't have parents in the sense that we typically think about, and I certainly had relationships that were episodic no long-term relationships from childhood to adulthood. But I did have people who came into my life and at the right time, they spoke words of life and encouragement. I think about my eighth-grade math teacher, I was the class clown and I can recall him shutting the classroom door one day and he slapped me he actually slapped me and then he hugged me and told me that he loved me.

I can remember my counselor, this was an agency supplied a counselor to me or my teen years and another strong African-American male role model who spoke words of encouragement and words of belief and he told me, Your life has value and purpose and I love you. I think those individuals and so many more whether they were teachers or they were counselors or they were members of the parish that I attended as a young boy, foster families that I lived with lots of different people came into my life at lots of different times to encourage me, and to give me a vision when I didn't have one for myself.

**Nichols:** It just reminds me, this is just such a common theme that I've heard from so many people, it's either a coach that noticed something in a person and called that out. Or teachers, teachers are so incredibly important. I mean, hats off to the teachers.

**Kimbrough:** I think teachers are so underrated and how they influence our young people. And so I made it a point in the past to go back and tell the teachers that help to mold me into shape me. How important and more generally, I try to get out once a year to talk broadly to teachers to let them know how important they are, what important influences they are on young people's lives, because when all things are falling apart, at home, you come to school, and you bring your whole self, to school and it's so important that teachers are able to stand in the gap. Now they don't get paid necessarily to do that, they get paid to educate us, but we know that they do so much more.

**Nichols:** Well, I just love what you've said about two different your councilor and your math teacher saying that they loved you, you know, and I truly believe they did for any teachers out there in our listening audience, Thank you. You are so appreciated and valued and as you said, Orv, if things are falling apart at home school can be a safe zone for a child. So incredibly important. So, talking about education, let's talk about your education journey, because you went on and went to MSU. So, talk to us a little bit about that. How did that happen?

**Kimbrough:** So, I went to public school I can recall my senior year thinking about what I wanted to do next, and I realized that I needed to do something because I didn't have a safety net. I knew that I needed to get out no matter

what after graduation. But when you look at my study over the prior three years, I was basically an average student, I didn't do well on standardized tests. I scored a 15 on ACT. It's always interesting when I share that tidbit because people can place you in a box and judge you immediately. They somehow think that that's score defines you defines you and speaks to your intelligence, when it doesn't. So, if you are a young person and you are listening, what you receive on the ACT or SAT, does not define you, as an individual or as a human being. So I ended up getting into the University of Missouri in Columbia, I studied social work in college, achieving both a Bachelor and Master's degree in my time, at MSU... And one of the most important lessons that I learned doing that period of study was that context matters.

We are both shaped by our environment and shapers of our environments. As a young person growing up in the foster care system. I was shaped by my environment and in a real sense, grew up with many deficits. This is important context. As I got older, and I felt empowered, I began to act on my environment, working extremely hard and smart consistently building relationships that created a context for higher performance.

**Nichols:** Yes, and you are a relationship person. I discovered that about you early on. You love to surround yourself with good people, right?

**Kimbrough:** Every breakthrough is on the other side of the right relationship.

**Nichols:** I love that? Can I quote you? So, you went on you got your education from MSU. But after MSU I think you did some things with faith beyond walls and then ultimately the United Way and you were there for a long time. So, talk to us about that journey. How did that all come about?

**Kimbrough:** So, when I graduated from MSU in 2000, I recall sitting around with other graduates and we were chatting about what we would do next. Social work as you all know is a combination of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and management and most of my peers had intended on going into a clinical setting. What that means is they were going to become therapists. I had a desire to be a consultant or to be an executive director, I was asked what I knew about consulting or being an executive director to which my reply was, I had built up a skill set throughout my years of school, and life experience that provided me with the ability to learn, solve problems and be agile.

I became a consultant, I consulted for one year, for the Vashon Jeff Vanderlou Initiative, and then became associate director of the organization, the Vashon Jeff Vanderlou Initiative was a comprehensive community development initiative, and we focused on housing, education, public safety, beautification in one of the regions toughest communities.

What I learned from this experience is the importance of transparency and trust. Residents wanted to know the true intent of all of these people who conversed on their neighborhoods and because there was a history of mistrust, we had to do significant work to ensure that this was in place to move forward.

**Nichols:** Okay, so I love that. The trust in the transparency, I get that they wanted to make sure that they could trust you, right? And you probably had to work extra hard because there had been a history of mistrust.

**Kimbrough:** That's right, that's with anything. When you are in relationship, if anybody breaks that trust, and someone else steps in, you still carry the wounds, right or wrong, you carry the wounds.

**Nichols:** Yeah, but everybody listening can relate to this. I know I certainly can. So then what led you to the United Way? Talk to us about that, because you had a pretty amazing journey through the United Way

**Kimbrough:** After the social work and doing my work with the Vashon Jeff Vanderlou Initiative, I began to pursue an MBA at the University of Missouri St Louis. And what I learned during this study is the biggest difference between for-profit and non-profit is the IRS designation. In the non-profit world. We have to earn enough money to keep operations stable. And if you're really, really successful, you'll generate a surplus for a rainy day. I also learn that the leadership strategy, customer and market focus workforce and process and business results are all the same. It's all the same stuff. We just talk about these things differently. When I became executive director of Faith beyond Walls. Next, I learned the importance of broad stakeholder management. A year into that role I took over the leadership of interface partnership, and managed both organizations and I learned the importance of managing complex relationships and forging team out of unlikely suspects.

I've been a United Way, Lisa, as you know for nearly 13 years and six years at the helm of the organization and during this period of come into a broader appreciation for the diversity of business in our region, and then even more appreciation of the power of brand, culture, teamwork, strategy, and execution to drive results. And even more than that I come to acquire an appreciation to create the conditions for the most number of people to succeed. So my journey to United Way while it was never my plan, I think it's been God's plan and every step of the way has prepared me for the work that I've been doing in a way.

**AD:** Okay, so we're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Orv. Really when we come back, I want you to talk a little bit more about the United Way and then that'll lead us into kinda what's next for you because you have a next assignment.

**Nichols:** Welcome back everyone, so... Orv I want to talk a little bit more about the United Way 'cause we've got something pretty special I think about St. Louis's United Way.

**Kimbrough:** I agree, St. Louis's United Way is special and it's about the people. But before I go there, our United Way as one of 1800 United Ways across the globe, we're in 41 different countries, the United Way is to largest, privately financed charity in the world. When you think about the St. Louis United Way, against all of that, our market is roughly 22nd largest metropolitan area in the US, our United Way last year ranked number one for total campaign dollars and if you think about our total top line revenue, we rank number three against any United Way.

That's pretty extraordinary. And when I'm asked, again, what the difference is, is all about the people in this region, it's about the caring nature of the people in this region is the fact that people really view the St. Louis Region as home and so many of us, we grew up here. We may go away for a short period, but we return here to raise families because it's a great quality of life for most.

**Nichols:** It is it really is kind of like a little hidden treasure. I feel like there's all kinds of things we could talk about it on that, but what I really want you talk about now you have a new assignment. So tell us about that journey.

**Kimbrough:** So, it's interesting. So, when I think about my time at United Way, I suspected that I would come in and I work for the organization for three years and I would make a transition. In fact, I stated that boldly to the CEO at that time and he kept giving me opportunity after opportunity to which I said, yes, and that led me to the CEO role. And I figured, from United Way of greater St. Louis that, I would likely be doing something on a national stage. And I think about this really from the standpoint of my plan versus God's plan. My plan was three years. God's plan was 13 years.

My plan was a national, God's plan was you're going to stay right here in the St. Louis region. My plan was stick with the non-profit sector. God's plan was you're going to move into the private sector. So I am now CEO of Midwest Bank Center, which is one of the largest financial services firms in the greater St. Louis region. And it's hard for most people to process that, but when you think about business in general it's all relationship-based. Certainly, there's a technical aspect to every business but business is based on relationship and its currency is trust. So that's what I've been doing for the last 13 years with the way building a currency of trust.

**Nichols:** I love that. Well, there are several things there that you said that I really want to kind of unpack. So one of the things that you said... And was this Gary Dollar? You said that Gary kept giving you opportunities and you kept saying yes.

**Kimbrough:** Gary kept giving me opportunities and I kept saying yes.

**Nichols:** Did it always feel comfortable?

**Kimbrough:** It was always awkward. I think one of the ways to differentiate yourself as a young leader is to figure out those things that your superiors don't like and get really good at it. And those things are not necessarily going to be things that you naturally gravitate to. You've got to be a problem solver. You will be their hero. Those are important things.

**Nichols:** So find those things that your leader doesn't love and get good at those, and then you'll be the... You'll be the hero. I love that, I love that. And I'm sure, taking on this new assignment, like you said, it's a relationship, but there's probably always stretching, right? It's not like something that you've done, but I think it's really important. Don't you? As we go through our journey to be risk takers.

**Kimbrough:** I think as leaders, we're called to be risk takers, but we're called to be measured risk takers. I always, when I'm operating at my own strength, I don't nearly optimize myself but when I operate in the strength that I believe God's placed in me, I stretch beyond what I even thought was possible. It's amazing. My daughter who is 16-years-old when she found out that I was moving into banking. She said, "Dad you don't even like math, what did he... What are you doing dad? And I said, "It's not that I don't like math, I like math but it has to be practical, and banking is practical.

I went on to explain to her that, for the last 20 years, I've been focusing so much on helping people and communities think about social capital and human capital, human capital, or the skills and education and the things that you need to go to the next level. And social capital is all about networks and relationships and I think all of

that's important, but I also think that in every community, we've gotta talk about capital. Financial Capital. You need it all just like every breakthrough is on the other side of a right relationship. Well, you also need money on that on the side as well as I go forward.

**Nichols:** I love that quote that you just said. Again, I just love that every opportunity is on the other side of a great relationship. So that really is kind of a segue into talking about somebody in your life that has been very instrumental, and we can segue into something extra in that particular person. Do you want to talk about that person a little bit?

**Kimbrough:** Dave Stewart. Dave has been that something extra for me. And I think it comes down to the fact that when you are around him, he causes you to stretch. I've never seen them have a bad day. His passion is contagious, he tells the story of starting worldwide way back when, and people would say to him. Well, you're in St. Louis and you're establishing worldwide.

Yeah, you're in ST. Louis. Now, their tagline now is Silicon Valley in the Midwest. I think it's amazing that he had that vision, even back then he got the vision even back then and you got to say it's so when it's not so, so then it can be so... He has inspired so many people and it's not just what you see in public life. I've gotten the opportunity to spend one-to-one time with him and he's consistent. And what it forces in you and is the same kind of time that he invests in you, you invest in others and you pay it forward...

**Nichols:** I love that, yeah. The world could use more people like that, but people like that are inspiring just by the way they live their life and he is all about pouring into other people and pouring into our community. Right, so, Orv, I know that you building into younger people is really important, to you, and you've been an adjunct professor at WashU? For some time, you still are. Talk to us a little bit about that and what you're doing at WashU right now.

**Kimbrough:** I'm really excited with the work that I've got going on at Washington University, right now. Yes, I'm an adjunct professor and right now designing a course on teams and leadership, alongside Gil Straton is for post-masters, individuals, so individuals who have achieved their master's degree. Teams have always been iatrical to my success. It's always been about the people who have been around me. That's why I've been successful and I've learned so much from the teams who pour themselves out day in and day out, to execute against mission, or to execute against vision. So I'm excited about that class that's coming up. It starts in February, and so we will do three weekends I think it's a Saturday and a Sunday all day for three weekends. But it's going to be immersive. It's going to be about looking at your own personal leadership style, looking at how you lead within an organization, looking at how you lead within the context of a community that's on the edge of doing something great.

**Nichols:** Great, and in your new role, tell the listening audience, if they want to help you in this new role, how can they do that?

**Kimbrough:** It's very simple. Checking, savings, loans, that's it. It really is just that simple. I'm the easiest guy in St. Louis to find. Midwest Bank Center is the easiest bank in a St Louis region to find. You want to support us, because we support and have a heart for people all throughout this community. The evidence is in where our branch locations are. The evidences and who we provide loans to it's the entire community, we fight for everybody in this region.

**Nichols:** Alright, and tell their friends, right? Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Kimbrough:** It's been my pleasure, Thank you, Thank you.