

Something Extra EP 027 – Cindy Erickson

Lisa Nichols: I'm thrilled to welcome my friend Cindy Erickson, to the show today. Cindy is the Chief Executive Officer of the American Red Cross of both Missouri and Arkansas. I am so excited to have you on the show today. You and I met years ago. I don't even know how long to go through STL forum. You are somebody that I just love, admire, respect all of those things, and there's a lot of reasons why. So thank you for making the time.

Cindy Erickson: Well, thank you for having me and I feel the exact same way about you as well.

Nichols: Well, let's talk... because we've got a lot of things to discuss today. So, talk to us a little bit about your growing up, what was it like growing up for you, Cindy?

Erickson: Yeah, well I had a wonderful, wonderful childhood both of my parents just raised us in this household of honor for the Lord, because that was part of our faith and part of my upbringing and grew up as the youngest only daughter with two older brothers. So you were the princess. Yes, I actually I was called a marshmallow when I was about 2. We can talk about that in another time. Yeah, just a wonderful upbringing. Not only with my parents, but then also just with grandparents and cousins and nephews so just a great nucleus here in St. Louis.

Nichols: So what I want to talk about now, and you could talk a little bit about your educational journey because I don't know that I know, I think you have a BS in Marketing, right?

Erickson: I do, I do since I grew up here in St. Louis and when I was growing up in the 80s. We don't think about university or college like they do today. And so I decided to stay close to home and ended up staying within Missouri and got my undergrad here in Missouri, and then did my Master's in Florida.

Nichols: And then you also don't you have a little bit of Executive Leadership and Training through Harvard?

Erickson: I do. When I lived in New York City. I was recruited to go to New York City and to serve as an interim CEO for a non-profit up there. I was 28 years old. You think you know everything. I knew absolutely nothing but had a just wonderful, mentors and coaches that really believed in me. And so one of the things that they invested in me was being able to do some executive courses there at Harvard for a number of years so just was very blessed by that.

Nichols: So the non-profit that you were with wasn't that the American Lung Association?

Erickson: It was it was the American Lung Association, and so I was brought up originally just to be there for a year, and ended up turning out to live there for nine years. I met my husband there, and just had a wonderful opportunity and just love living in New York City.

Nichols: I'm really glad to say that you're back in St. Louis because I don't know that you and I would have met if you'd still lived in New York. So what brought you back to St. Louis? Talk to us a little bit about that.

Erickson: Yeah, so living up in New York City, and for anyone that's lived in a bigger city, just how busy the hustle and bustle, is. And unfortunately, I had some life-defining moments up there ended up being diagnosed with cancer when I was 34 years old, and had a recurrence, then about a year and a half later, and having gone through just all the treatments and the journey of that process that you go through just really got to a point where I needed to slow down and make some life choices about just the quality of my life and the balance of my life. And so part of that decision was getting out of New York, which was getting off the crazy wheel, it was coming back to St. Louis and really kind of re-adjusting my lifestyle and just really thinking about my priorities as well, and so just really grateful for the opportunity I had in New York. But it's so good to be home.

Nichols: Yes, and I know how important family is to you so being closer to your mom and dad was important to you as well.

Erickson: It's amazing that when we've all been through our own trials and difficult circumstances, and so you really get to see who your friends are during that time, and I just was blessed just so much by just so many people, just their love and generosity toward me, and then my parents as well. It's hard to explain just how much they were there for me and just every step of the way

Nichols: And that had been so hard to be diagnosed with cancer at 34.

Erickson: Yeah, I had just gotten married, and two months earlier and got diagnosed. And so that also was a defining moment because the plan to have family and all of that, changed because I no longer was going to have that opportunity through the traditional measures and then at that point, really just searching God and what his plan was for my life and I've always had a very close walk with the Lord. I've been a Christian since I was in elementary school so that was just such a huge part of my life and just really being able to lean in to see, I thought my life was going to look like this with my children and family and the husband and that sort of thing, and it turned out to be something very different. But, how God can bless us in that moments too, if we allow him too. Certainly got to experience.

Nichols: Yeah, and he's just so faithful. I can't imagine going through things like that, without faith. So you also had another life interruption. You've had some things that are really hard. And what I have heard you say before, Cindy, is that, those things as hard as they were, they have really shaped who you are, who you are as a leader. There's characteristics that you have, maybe that were born out of that. So talk about that a little bit.

Erickson: Absolutely, I think I've definitely had a couple words, adjectives, to describe. I think I've got a lot more perseverance in life, I've got more grit than what I thought I had. Because of some of those defining moments. And how do we show up as a leader, when you're going through chemo and it's really important that you are taking care of yourself, you're doing your self-care.

But at the same time, it's... For me it was really important to have a purpose that was outside of just making sure I'm healthy, which that was the priority, but that I also had another purpose, and that was my career, and then also just my calling to be in the non-profit industry. And so as a result of those experiences, I feel like I'm a much better leader have a lot more empathy, I can certainly would relate to all different types of individuals. I can relate a deeper to pain and suffering and then also what it takes to bounce back from that and the resiliency that you also need because people are watching you.

I didn't realize that as much probably as my second life transformation or experience, and that was as I've shared with you in the past my husband, John, just a really successful pilot and had been in aviation his entire career and flew helicopters and jets and all of that end up having 4 brain aneurysms which really was a miracle that he even lived through the second round of

brain brain aneurysms that he had, but as a result, it left him completely in the need of care. 24/7. John pretty much lived in a nursing home for about 11 years. So how do again in a leadership role back here in St. Louis, how do I balance that making sure John gets the care that he needs the attention that he needs and that he deserves. So that was really, again, definitely a defining moment for for me, personally, then also professionally.

Nichols: But I watched you and you stood by his side the whole time. I'm sure people looking at that, you showed them how to live through something like that and that you're there for people, regardless of what they're going through. So even how hard it was and I know that it had been, it was hard on him, but it was hard on you too. I know that as his caregiver.

Erickson: Yeah, for John, he pretty much didn't have a memory and so had lost a lot of that and so it was more reminiscing and reminding him of his memories and I think that really so many people had asked how I endured that time. And you really look at it, it's just one step and then it's also just being obedient and just God's faithfulness and His mercy and His grace, there's so many things that I've learned about myself as a leader, as well as other individuals. You know, too. And when we're at our worst, you can see this incredible beauty come from ashes, and the Lord talks about not giving us anymore that we can handle, and really to trust Him. And so that's really what I chose to do. It's also a choice.

We've all been through a tremendous amount of adversity at different levels, but it really is a choice. And I chose to follow the Lord and where He was leading us as a family and what he was calling me to do and to be for John. And I know at some point when I am called home I'll get to understand what the bigger picture was, hopefully get to understand. I got to see some of that along the way of why we endured the 11 years that we endured. And I would do it all over again, for those blessings.

Nichols: I'm just reminded because you can't always see the end, you don't know how this is going to end when these things happen to us but you and I've often talked there is a book, I know that you know which one I'm talking about, but there is a book that really ministered to you during that time. Can you tell the listening audience, what that book is?

Erickson: So, it's just enough light for the step I'm on and it really is when we do get in those moments, of not knowing what to do and you're just kind of stuck or you're immobile or in this book by Stormy and I can't think of how to pronounce her last name. Stormy O. And it really is just a testament about looking at what step that you are on right now and where God has you

and just focusing on that next step and he's going to shine the light for that next step, so just be patient abide in Him search scriptures.

There's so many promises that are in the Bible, about what God is calling us to do, and our road map and directions are right there in front of us, so it's just a wonderful book. So whenever I have friends or loved ones that are just going through a really difficult time. That's a book I share with them, because it just ministered.

Nichols: And again, the title is just enough light for the step you are on, By Stormy O. because neither one of us can pronounce her last name. Well very good, thank you for sharing that.

So let's talk about your journey from the American Lung Association to what you are doing now, because you're with another fabulous a non-profit that does tremendous work. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Erickson: Yeah, I certainly can. I've spent about 30 years in the non-profit industry and started my career out here in St. Louis with United Way and just loved that experience and felt like I had found my calling for the industry and so when I got recruited to go to New York and to work up there for nine years, I was helping to merge several different lung association's up there, and while it was up in New York, I was there during 911, right, and I just... First of all, everybody remembers where they were on that day, and have very vivid memories on what I was doing and the whole entire day. But one of the things that I saw in the days after that was just the incredible work that the American Red Cross was doing there and just so inspired and moved by the compassion I saw in helping the New Yorkers just heal and tried to move on and find family members. And so then we... I moved to St. Louis as I said, getting off the crazy wheel, of New York and slowing down and when I was ready to get into an organization, the Red Cross was at the top of my list.

Nichols: Awesome.

AD: We're going to take a quick break and we'll be back with Cindy Ericson.

Nichols: So Cindy, let's back up just one minute, let's talk about Operation return home. And you were very instrumental in that... Can you talk a little bit about that?

Erickson: Yeah, at that time, and still today, the American Lung Association, they're really concerned about people's lung health. And so there were several initiatives that we launched one was Operation return home which was to help the local residents go back into their home.

We partnered with the New York City Health Department, and another... A number of other organizations where we were able to provide them with tip sheets on how do I go back into my home how do I make sure it's properly cleaned?

We got a so many donations for nebulizers, air purifiers, air conditioning units, all of that that we got donated where we were able then to put those into the hands of individuals who had lung disease and asthma, which is such a problem in New York City. So that was part of our operation return home initiative is to really get that information out to the local residents to be able to go back into their homes, and then specifically help those that have a lung disease.

Nichols: And then American Red Cross I'm thinking American Red Cross. I didn't even realize everything that the American Red Cross does. It's not just disaster relief. I mean, you guys have the fire alarm, the smoke detectors. I mean, there's so much... I remember getting to meet Dave Sanderson through you. And you had brought him to STL and Dave was the last passenger on the plane, on the miracle on the Hudson and I just remember him saying that the American Red Cross was right there with blankets for everyone. So there's so much there, but for our listening audience that may not understand everything the American Red Cross does. Can you shorten it down and tell us some of those things, because you're saving lives in so many different ways.

Erickson: Yeah, it's remarkable and that's probably... We talk about the something extra at the American Red Cross and that's something extra for us. It's our people just incredible humanitarian that are willing to show up on many times, it's someone's worst day and it's really about bringing comfort and hope to them. And so the Red Cross, many people know us for our disaster services and so what they don't realize the biggest disaster that we respond to are home fires. And so, within Missouri Arkansas last night alone, we had over 32 fires in these two states, and so we have volunteers at 2:00-in the morning or at 3:00 in the morning, or whenever the fire happens, they'll show up to take care of the family while the firefighters are taking care of the fire and we make sure they have a safe place to stay that night and we help them develop a plan and connect them to other wonderful organizations.

So, it's that type of disaster, the larger-scale disasters that tornados and hurricanes, floods, we do a lot of those which we're gearing up for a really busy, busy season right now. We also, a lot

of people don't know is our services armed forces and so we are the only authorized organization to provide emergency communication for our military. So when an emergency happens at home, a lot of times there isn't communication ability, even with the social media that's out there, or many times that's not available to our military depending on where they're located. So actually the families will contact us and let us know there's an emergency and we're able to then facilitate being able to get that emergency communication to the military member. And then, many times it's also bringing them home for a funeral or to say good-bye to a family member in those sad cases. So those are two of the areas, and then of course we collect blood.

It is about saving lives because every time you donate, you can save up to three lives. And so the American Red Cross, we provide or 40% of our nation's blood supply, and we have to keep the shelves stocked of blood. So we can make sure that we can meet the needs of hospitals and so we really just encourage... If you can donate please donate blood because you just never know when you're family member, you know, might need that.

Nichols: So, if someone in the listening audience right now, it's your company, if you're not doing this, the American Red Cross will bring a blood mobile and they will sit there for nine to two, or whatever the case may be, and people can sign up so it's a very, very easy way to do that, so I would highly encourage those out there that aren't doing that, to do that. I kind of had talked about the smoke detectors and that. And so talk a little bit what you're doing. You said there were 32 fires last night, but what you guys are doing is on preventive.

Erickson: Absolutely, so that's part of... A big part of what the American Red Cross does is help to prepare our communities in times of disasters too. And so, we've got apps that you can download our emergency app, there's our tornado app. Or first aid app, all free. And so with our number one disaster that we respond to nationwide being home fires, we launched an initiative a couple of years ago where we're installing free smoke alarms and so the listening audience wherever you are in our country, you can contact your local American Red Cross and we partner with the local fire departments across the country, and we can come out and install smoke alarm for you a couple. And then in addition to that, we help families prepare.

What's my emergency plan if there was a fire, and what should I do? And so, it's education for the kids as well as the family and many homes, we go in, there's extended family in the home, and so it's really about that preparedness. And so this last year, we installed our millionth alarm in the country are are we... And then we've been able to document that we've saved over 600

lives across the country and then here in Missouri we've saved within the last three years we've saved 24 lives. And most recently, just up in Ferguson, my family.

Nichols: I just love it. Well, people ask me all the time about volunteer opportunities and let me tell you, there are volunteer opportunities if you are looking for a place to serve, called the American Red Cross because they definitely have opportunities to do that.

Erickson: There's opportunities pretty much for everything, over 90% of our workforce are volunteers. And so, they power our mission, and like I mentioned, they are incredible humanitarians.

Nichols: And you can't do what you do without them, you need those volunteers, 90% of the workforce or volunteers. So, you need people To raise their hand and say... I know I want to help, I want to serve. I love that.

Is there something, is there something in your tenure as the CEO, for American Red Cross that you're really proud of? I know you're proud of your people you're proud of your team.

Erickson: That's probably the number one thing because it's a privilege and an honor to work at the American Red Cross. And so when people come to our organization, they're looking for a life of meaning, and purpose and sometimes that could be as part of our staff and then many times it's as a volunteer, and so it's really just the privilege and honor to work alongside them because they're willing just to sacrifice so much to help others and it kind of goes back just to that servant's heart and that's the something extra.

It's that servant's heart, and I think it really has made me so much of a better leader, and I wouldn't, I don't think would have selected that servant's heart had I not been through the adversity personally, that I've been through because I know how important and how powerful that is for my own kind of why and the purpose of what I do and why I do.

Nichols: And I would say that that to me characterizes who you are from the time I've known you. I just think you're a very humble person, very humble person, but just always looking out for the good of other people and I so appreciate that about you.

So, Cindy, I know you and I both believe that mentorship is important, especially as the CEO of an organization. The size of American Red Cross, I am sure that there have been times when

you're like... I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do in this situation. I say, You never reach the summit. There is always the next level. And don't ever think that you have reached the summit because there's going to come something that you don't know.

So, mentorship, we both believe it's important. What did that look like for you? Did you have some mentors that you want to talk about? How do you find a mentor? If somebody's in our listening audience that wants a mentor?

Erickson: I think, yeah, mentoring is so critical. I know for my own career trajectory, it was just vital. I had a wonderful mentor when I lived in Florida, and worked for the American Lung Association before I got recruited to go to New York and she just, again, at 28 years old, I feel like I so much at that time, she just really walked alongside me just the encouragement. When I got to New York, she was the one that actually put my name into the hat.

So when I got up to New York, one of my board members was with a large pharmaceutical company at the time and he knew again, that I was 28 years old and knew so much and that we were really trying to do a lot of changes at the Lung Association at that time, and so he actually approached me and said, Cindy. Would you be interested in working with an executive coach, and some resources? And I'm like, "That sounds awesome. What is an Executive coach? This was back in the 90s. He explained to me what it was, and I'm just like, "Oh my gosh, what a gift... And so I met an executive coaching firm that then worked with me for about six years, not only me, but our leadership team, our employees and so all the organizational development items that we hear about today. I got to experience all those in the '90s and that was at the generosity of my board member who actually covered all of that because he believed in the organization.

He believed in the, I guess, he saw something in me... And was willing to do that, it was such a gift. And so that's just really pressed upon me how important it is for us to again pay that forward, and to encourage and to be mentors for others. Sometimes it's a short season, sometimes it might be a longer season. And I think we also develop and have mentors at different times in our life too, with our journey and I've just been really blessed with that, and so whenever I have an opportunity to either mentor or visit with younger professionals, I always take that opportunity.

Nichols: So, what a gift that this board member came forward and that he actually underwrote that for you that's amazing. But if there's someone in the listening audience that says "Well I

don't have a board member that it's underwriting. How do I find a mentor?" What would you say, what are some of the steps that they could take?

Erickson: Some of the things that we do with the Red Cross. It's also talking with your supervisor, other leaders in your organization that you admire and respect, and that part of your own development plan, here are some things that you're hoping to accomplish and so it's really important to think about what's your own career track and where you see yourself going in the types of experiences that you need and that first of all, that supervisor should be helping you with that development plan. And then part of that is just trying to identify mentors, and so sometimes with an organization, there's a lot of mentoring opportunities within organizations.

The Red Cross were really fortunate because we're such a large organization and so it's not necessarily somebody that's in St. Louis but they could be in another part of the country, but there's also wonderful local resources too that you can tap into as well, depending on if you're in the non-profit industry, or what trade organization you're in, that's another way in which you can find mentors. And then the main thing we know is to ask.

Nichols: What's the worst thing that can happen?

Erickson: And yeah, they will say, "You know what, I would love to do that. I don't have time for it right now, but I have somebody else that probably would have that time in an availability.

Nichols: Absolutely, we've talked about the blood mobile we've talked about volunteer opportunities. Tell the listening audience again, if they would want to volunteer if they would want to give blood, how do they go about that?

Erickson: There are volunteer opportunities all over the country, and so absolutely go to our website Redcross.org or you can also call 1800-RedCross. You can donate blood, you can find us on the website or calling as far as where we're collecting blood. Some of our fix sites, so you can sign up, you can download our blood app and then coming up in April and May, we've got a nationwide initiative that's called sound the alarm and it goes right with what I had shared the importance of having a working smoke alarm, and a preparedness plan. So we've got this initiative that we'll be rolling out across the country, so if you'd like to plug in, and to go and install alarms in people's homes and to educate them and hang out with our awesome firefighters across the country, join our humanitarian efforts.

Nichols: Awesome, very good. Well, I just want to say thank you to Clara Barton. Our woman founder, of American Red Cross and thank you, Cindy. We are so honored and humbled to have you as the Chief Executive Officer of the American Red Cross here in Missouri and Arkansas. Thank you for being here.