

Something Extra EP 020: Dena Ladd

Lisa Nichols: On today's show, I'm thrilled to welcome Dena Ladd. Dena is Executive Director of Missouri Cures, a non-profit whose mission is to promote and protect medical research in the state of Missouri.

Dena, I'm so excited to have you with us today, you and I got to know each other, really just very recently, because of the WISE event that you run, but you are just a phenomenal woman, and I'm just so excited for our listening audience to hear more about your story.

Dena Ladd: Thank you for having me, and yes, thank you. You are a part of our Women in Science and Entrepreneurship conference last November that sold out and so I'm still hearing about that... dynamite blonde who talked about how she started her business and so forth. So, thank you for being a part of it.

Nichols: Well, you have a lot to talk about. We probably have more to talk about. Then we have time for... So, I want to go on and jump in. I'm just very interested a little bit in your story about how you grew up and then we'll segway into some other things.

Ladd: I grew up in Springfield, Missouri and my father was an entrepreneur, a real estate developer and was also a pilot. So, I love, I have a love for flying and was very fortunate. He would put his in his plane and we'd take off and go see the country or going some pretty amazing trips. And I attend a Drury University in Springfield, so I kind of grew up in a small town, which was really nice and then I moved to the big city after college and came to St. Louis.

Nichols: Yeah, so it was funny, because I heard the story from you, that you were... what 22 before you ever flew, commercially? You were like... What are these people doing on the plane? What's going on with this? Because since you were like four... You said your dad would just put you guys in a plane and fly all around.

Ladd: We did, and we were on a trip and I believe I was maybe a little younger, 19, and something had happened to the plane, one of the landing gear and so we had to take a commercial flight, home, and I was like, Wow, a lot of people on this plane.

Nichols: A little different, very interesting. Well, I bet you a lot of our listening audience doesn't know this, but you were kind of... You started out as a fashionista, after college, right? Tell us a little bit about that. Who did you work for?

Ladd: I did so my undergrad is communication and business, and I always knew I wanted to be in the retail industry, so I jumped right in and worked for a small boutique. I did all their buying. And then I eventually had my own little retail place in Springfield for a while, and then after moving to St Louis, I eventually went to work for Christian Dior then moved to Chicago, and it was, it was like the exciting, glamorous job, that I always wanted. But as we all know, those glamorous jobs are a lot of hard work. So, I traveled every week throughout the country, to New York and to Paris, but it was a wonderful opportunity. It's interesting, my kids go "Really mom, you did this, because they only know me with my current work. In public policy, working in politics and of course, running Missouri Cures.

Nichols: But you've got the pictures to prove that... yes, I really did do this.

Ladd: Yeah, yeah, but it taught me a lot and it was a great opportunity. Great way to see the world too.

Nichols: Well, okay, so what moved you really from fashion then... To action? Let's talk about that a little bit.

Ladd: Well, I've always volunteered whether it was sitting on a nonprofit board or just showing up and volunteering hands-on type of volunteering. And so, when I moved back to St. Louis, I decided to pursue my graduate degree. I went to SIUE. Got my MPA, Master's in public administration, public policy, and I knew from then on out, it was going to be a totally different world and career change, but I just really loved it and had a lot of great opportunities. Whether it's with non-profits, or as I said, being involved with public policy going to DC, going to Jefferson City. So, it was the right move for me.

Nichols: Well, and I think you said you just, you wanted to do something that made a difference. You saw that as a way to make a difference and there was a time when you actually ran for office, right? You were encouraged to run for office? Was that a little scary?

Ladd: I was just being an advocate. I was really involved with St Louis Children's Hospital and Epworth Family and Children's Center sitting on all these boards. I was appointed twice by Governor Blunt and then Governor Nixon for the Children's Trust Fund board. So, I was just being the do-gooder and loving what I did. And that was approached by two female former legislators

Senator Betty Sims, the late Betty Sims, who's greatly missed, and Amy McCollum and they said, we need more women in politics, which I totally agreed, and they said... So, you're going to run... I said, "What? It's not on my bucket list." But I was spending so much time in Jefferson City, on various issues, I knew a lot of the legislators, I knew how the process worked, so I jumped in, into a primary with two men. I had 4 months. And let me just warn everyone. You can't run in 4 months. But there were issues I cared about, and one was medical research, and so I lost the primary, but it was certainly a good experience. But I am a little caught off when people say to me. Now, did you run for office? And I said Yes, but I encourage women to get involved whether it's on the school board level, or city council, whatever. Your voice really matters.

Nichols: Sometimes I always say, you just can't stand on the sidelines and say, "I don't like this," or "I don't like that. You need to roll up your sleeves and get involved.

Ladd: And getting involved with public policy is easier than people realize, it's just an issue you care about, it's getting involved with an organization. I do encourage people to go to Jefferson City and talk to their law makers because they are the ones who are going to influence public policy. I'd go to DC if you have the opportunity, and every time I go to DC—I go about two or three times a year—I am in awe. It's really quite an amazing place being on Capitol Hill, and so forth, right?

Nichols: So do you have any recommendations for a young woman that may be sitting here in our listening audience saying yeah, I think I really would love to get involved. Do you have any tips or advice?

Ladd: Well, there used to be training programs for women to get involved in politics. There was the Sue Shear Institute at UMSL, which I don't know if it still exists, I believe it does. And then I also tell people to kind of find a mentor, or if they're interested in the school board to start showing up at the meetings, get to know some of the members and then find out how you can maybe run for office for your local school board or your local city council or if you're in the city, go to the ward meetings and so forth. But I think that's the best way. And then you really get to know people who are involved.

Nichols: Well, that's a really good segway because I know that you are very passionate about health care and medicine and medical research. So that really took you to a new place... What you're doing today, you're the executive director for Missouri Cures. So, tell us a little bit more about Missouri Cures because some of our audience may not know about Missouri Cures.

Ladd: We actually started as a campaign in 2005 we ran the 2006 Stem Cell Cures and Research amendment and what that did, it passed. So, all medical research that's legal on the federal level is legal in Missouri and that's extremely important because we have such amazing research institutions here, we want the best, we want the brightest researchers and we don't want to put limits on them, so it allows all medical research to take place in our state. It also gives patients access to cures and therapies. So, it was a really important amendment and then we shut down the campaign, they became a 501c4 and then in 2010, I was asked to come back and kind of figure it out what direction we're going in. And so, I became the executive director. So we still have our 501c4 which is our advocacy arm, and then in 2011, I started our non-profit arm which is the Missouri Cures Education Foundation. And then we also have a large state pack, which supports legislators who support medical research.

Nichols: And I know that we've talked a little bit, one of the things you guys do is you pull together people for symposiums, and medical research. Can you talk a little bit about that and if there's listeners that want to get involved in that how would they do that?

D: We'd love for you to get involved. So, if you go to MissouriCures.org, it takes you to a website, you can sign up to receive our monthly newsletter, you'll get invitations to our symposiums and so, we do research symposiums which really highlight the work of researchers around the state. We've done clinical trial symposiums cancer research symposiums. Last year, we did a gene editing symposium which sold out and then we also do our women in science and entrepreneurship conference in St. Louis and we do the WISE events all around the state.

Nichols: You do several of those, right? And five or six of the different metros around the state?

Ladd: Colombia Kansas City St. Joe and we're doing one in Springfield this year, so it's just a way to bring women together that are really in the STEM and business field and women can network, meet other women in the field, and it's been really successful.

Nichols: And get great knowledge and new tips and things like that, that's great. So, talk to us a little bit then... So, Missouri Cures and you guys are looking at all different. You're looking at Alzheimer's. I think even ALS, it really covers the whole gamut doesn't it? Autism, I think it is one of the things that Missouri Cures is involved in. So pretty much any type of disease, right?

Ladd: We do. And so, I work extremely closely with Washington University and University of Missouri, St. Louis University, UMKC, the Stowers Institute for Medical Research in Kansas City. I'm really fortunate. There's not a day that doesn't go by that I think, "Wow, I met, so cool

research, or an amazing patient advocate.” We have patient advocates who care about the research because they have a family member who's affected by ALS or Parkinson's. So, I receive—I'm on the media list of most of the research institutions—and we send that out through our social media, we send out three to four stories a week and it's not all types of different, various diseases. What's going on? So if you want to follow us on twitter, Missouri Cures. If you want to go to our Facebook page and as I said, or sign up for our newsletter, man, you'll be on top of it, you'll know all the research, going on.

Nichols: You do a lot of reading, don't you Dena? Well, can you give us an example of one story? Can you think of a story that you can say even that came out this week or last week that you can talk about?

Ladd: I can give you two. So, and I try to be balanced because all the institutions are amazing, but for instance, a lot of people don't realize the University of Missouri, their cancer center, is affiliated with MD Anderson, so they're doing some great work there. They're also focused on personalized medicine, which is a big topic. So when people are diagnosed now with cancer, it's not just the standard. Okay, you're going to get radiation you're going to get chemotherapy. They really look at your case and they determine what's going to work best for you, whether it's immune therapy or sometimes they look into your DNA or your mutation coming from... So it's a real personalized effort. Washington U is placing a lot of emphasis on personalized medicine. Then also at Washington University, what they do in the field of Alzheimer's is just amazing. They're doing an international trial. They recently came out with they think they can do maybe a blood test to determine early onset of Alzheimer's. So it's really amazing. And then St. Louis University, they really have made great strides in the vaccine area, so they do a lot there. They also have their Liver Center, so they do a lot of research in that area, the livers and treatments and so forth. So, we were really fortunate in Missouri. People don't realize we've got some great research going on.

Nichols: It's encouraging you know this should offer hope. We're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Dena Ladd.

Nichols: I want to go back to the WISE Conference, the Women in Science and Entrepreneurship. Over the years you've had some really amazing women that have come and spoken, and I would love for you just to maybe pull out a few of those stories and tell our listening audience what some of these amazing women are doing.

Ladd: So yes, there are so many amazing women around, the state when we do our event in Springfield, it's like Wow, or Saint Joe. There's great women everywhere. So a couple just talk about would be Sarah Hill out of Columbia. She's a former news reporter or anchor. She has created Story Up and it is a virtual reality device, to where she really created it for veterans who could not travel to DC to see the memorials that I was like, "Oh my goodness". And so now they use it for other types of production pieces and so forth. And a funny little twist there, as I got to know Sarah, I found out that her mother was one of my long-time volunteers from Hannibal, Missouri—her mother Beth, a nurse. I just couldn't believe it, I was like, "Oh my... So, it's always you're meant to meet people along the way, but, yeah, so Beth, her mom was very instrumental in our campaign in 2006 and then I got to know Sarah. Sarah is amazing. And then also Dr. Jennifer Silva from Washington University she's a pediatric cardiologist if that's not impressive enough, SentiAR is her company. She's created another device to where it creates a hologram of her patient's heart, so it really guides her when she does surgery. And she's amazing, she's just fantastic. And when you look around, especially St. Louis and you see so many women who have leadership roles in the research field. Dr. Jenny Lodge is the Vice Chancellor of Research, at the School of Medicine at Washington University, Dean Elizabeth Laboa, she's Dean of Engineering at Mizzou. Dean Michelle Sabic as a Dean of Engineering aviation and technology at SLU and then Toni Kutchan, she's the Vice President of Research at the Danforth Plant Science Center, so we have some real strong women and leadership roles.

Nichols: Absolutely, we're always talking about encouraging young women to get more into STEM, so it's neat to have these women that have really not necessarily reached the summit or the Pinnacle, because I always say there's always a next level, but they're doing amazing things as it relates to STEM... So I do want to talk about the Danforth Center, and I had told you that years ago, it's been years ago, but I just remember going and having a tour there and they were developing this root and I couldn't remember what it was called, but you just had said to me earlier, it's called this and I was so impressed by that. Talk a little bit about that and what they're doing with the root in Africa.

Ladd: I always feel like I'm like the stepsister of the Danforth Center. Dr. William Danforth was a founder of Missouri Cures along with the late Jim Stowers, and then Dr. Danforth of course, started the Danforth Plant Science Center, so he's an amazing man. I feel very fortunate that I work with him. But the Danforth Center, again, they do a lot of conversations that are open to the

public. And we were really lucky that last fall, we partnered with them on our gene editing symposium. So, we did a segment on agriculture, we did a segment on human health, medical research and then we did a panel on economic development and how it's going to... What are the possibilities in our state with gene therapy and gene editing and we sold out, it was free at the Danforth Center. So it's just, they're just a wonderful partner and they do such amazing work and they are the largest plant science center in the world.

Nichols: Is that right? I did not realize that. What a treasure... Yeah, they are a treasure. So I would encourage our listening audience anyone who has not taken a tour of the Danforth Plant and Science Center go and we'll give you Dena's information and she can set you up with a tour. Yeah, it is just an amazing place and doing great work. So Dena, talking about the Danforth plant and science center, what an amazing family, just an amazing family. I don't remember, years ago, reading a book is just I don't know, maybe 100 pages. It's probably over 100 years old now by William Danforth that started Ralston, and it was called I Dare You. And I still to this day when I'm speaking, I refer to that book often but talk to us a little bit because you've spent a lot of time with a lot of the Danforths. Yeah, so let's talk a little bit about what even you think is... something extra. Tell our listening audience little bit more about the legacy of the Danforth family.

Ladd: Well, I've been very fortunate. I always say to myself, "Oh I grew up in Springfield, Missouri. And how did I become so lucky to really have an opportunity to work with Dr. Danforth and then also Senator Danforth at one time, I worked with him, helping him run a pack and he is an amazing man. And then Dr. Danforth is just... it's always about you, when I see he's like, "Oh, Dena, you're you doing a great job," or he really makes you stop and think about the work you're doing and how you're giving back to the community. And how... Like with Missouri cures, we're moving cures and therapies for word hopefully, we're helping patients and families and really raising the awareness of the importance of medical research. And he has done so much. The Danforths have done so much for our community. Yes, really, with the Danforth Plant Science Center and Missouri cures and he was really involved with the St. Louis public schools at one time. He's just such a... And then of course, very involved with the Life Science community BIO-STL and bio-generator, and just really building that environment and that sector, which I feel intersects with medical research cause I work a lot with the life science industry and BIO-STL and so forth, it's really a very strong economic development piece of our state creating jobs and

bringing companies here and so forth. So he's had his hand in a lot of different areas and the community certainly benefits from it.

Nichols: So, as I'm hearing you speak, it's all about making the world a better place. Our community first.

Ladd: It truly is. And I'm fortunate, I go to Kansas City about every other month. And again, Jim Stowers who started the Stowers Institute. Is amazing, and they have the Kauffman Foundation and so I see what goes on in Kansas City, which is really great stuff and in great entrepreneurs and the life science they call that the animal corridor with health, animal research. And then I see what's going on in St. Louis. In Springfield we have Jordan Valley Innovation Center. There's some great innovation going on there, and of course Columbia with the university—great work there, with the researchers and the medical school. So, it's just, Missouri's got a lot going on.

Nichols: I could not agree with you more and it makes me proud to be a Missourian.

Ladd: Yeah, me too, and I love it too. When I go to St. Joe and I'm like, "Wow they got an innovation center up here. This is amazing!"

Nichols: I think there's nine of them. Because I was fortunate to be on the Governor's Innovation Task Force, so I got to travel the state and I was in awe of everything we've got going on and that is why I just... any opportunity that we have to tell the story that cool stuff is going on here, with like the Danforth Center, the mission to feed the world. This is really cool stuff right here in the heartland, right?

Ladd: And also going back to... That's why we passed Amendment 2, to really make sure that we have strong medical research taking place in our state, and at that researchers want to come here, companies want to come here and invest here. And so, I feel we're challenged every year with things that pop up sometimes in Jefferson City, but that's why we exist. That is really the purpose of Missouri Cures, we exist to protect medical research, so we watch legislation, we follow legislation there, we follow the ballot initiatives, and we make sure that there are no anti-Medical Research amendments put onto those pieces which could really hurt the research taking place in the state. So, even though we do great symposiums and we do the women's event we exist to protect medical research. That's really why Missouri Cures is here.

Nichols: Very good. Well, let's segway into something extra. So this is Something Extra. And I would really love for you to talk about Dena and you've seen a lot of leaders in your life, you are a leader, what is this something extra that you believe every leader needs?

Ladd: I thought hard about this and I thought it's just... I think it's networking skills, and communication skills. It really is relationship building. People ask me... I didn't grow up in Saint Louis, I've lived here for 20 some years, but how do you know all these people? And you're very connected and it's just really networking. Jumping on those opportunities to go to an event, even if you have to go by yourself to walk in and meet at least three new people and they're all interesting, all fascinating. I always say that I meet so many interesting people in what I do, whether it's in my volunteer work, whether it's in my job, so I really think you have to be willing to learn about people and listen to what they have to say, but then also maintain those relationships, which can be a challenge. You don't want to just reach out to someone, every time you need something that is just checking in, how are they, or how are their kids? And I also get introduced a lot through email and those email introductions and I always say yes, I might not meet with people as much as I used to, but I'm certainly available for a 30-minute phone call. Absolutely, because you never know again, who they know, or who you could connect them to. And that was part of WISE is connecting women networking and encouraging the young woman who came to gather five business cards. And so I think that something extra really is relationship building, like you said.

Nichols: I think it's huge and I'm a really high-growth person. I'd love to grow, love to learn new things, and I've always said... That is one of the ways that I personally have grown is just by the people because every person you talk to, you're going to learn something and hopefully you're giving them some value too. That's the other piece of it, right? Maybe they'll learn something from you. So that's a great something extra.

Well, Dena, it has been such a pleasure to have you on, thank you so much for making the time, 'cause I know you're a busy woman.

Ladd: Lisa, thank you for having me, always a pleasure to be with you.

Nichols: So if someone does want to learn more though they would go to...?

Ladd: MissouriCures.org and also follow us on Twitter @MissouriCures or good or a Facebook page. And again, you can sign up to get our monthly newsletter and receive our invitations to our symposium.

Nichols: Very good and I would highly encourage people to do that.