

Knopp: No quite the opposite. Most people laugh because I pretty much grew up in The Cleaver household. We, we didn't have any given squirt guns, growing up. My grandfather did serve in World War II, in the Army Air Corps, but he never talked about it as many World War II veterans, experience. But I was in college, my freshman year. We were still on the core assessment, I needed a one credit class frantically going through the college catalog and didn't want to pay for a sport that I had already done in high school and I found the Military Science department and they had a one-credit course, on physical fitness and military training.

I thought, Well, I fit something new. Why not? That one credit course would change my life. I ended up taking courses, my sophomore year in between my sophomore and junior year actually, I was accepted and studied overseas at Cambridge University and so my family, I think breathe the collective sigh of relief that I gotten it out of my system. When I came back, they offered me a scholarship and there was just something in my heart that told me this is where I'm supposed to be, I'm supposed to be serving in something bigger than myself. And that this was how I was going to use and deploy my International Relations degree in a way that I hadn't even dreamed of before.

Nichols: One class was kind of a pivot point for you and you probably hadn't even thought about a military career prior to that class, right?

Knopp: Never, and in fact once, I told my family that I was going to go in the military, my aforementioned grandpa actually flew in with my grandma and begged me not to do it. They said, please don't do this. I don't want you to be exposed to what I was exposed to.

Of course, I didn't know what he had been exposed to, he never spoke of it, but I will also tell you that two years later when I graduated and was commissioned as a second lieutenant he was standing there, standing tall and could not have been more proud. I would hope that, I did him proud with my service in the military for years on active duty.

Nichols: Well, thank you for your service, Meredith. I know you and I've talked about this, but so much of who you are today is because of that, right? And we've talked about how really, the military is the best leadership training there is, and you've carried so many of those lessons learned for even with what you're doing today.

Knopp: It is truly an ability to bring people from all different backgrounds, all different walks of life, together, in a shared experience, and it really is about being part of something bigger than yourself. I did all sorts of things I deployed all over the world. The Army. They actually mean what they say, we did that. And I have so many stories and so many beautiful experiences of people being able to see past what some people unfortunately might see and find a way to work together. And it's harmonious and it's beautiful and it's so special and the bonds are so strong. I can tell you that some my dearest friends to this day are people that I served in the military. I'd do anything for them.

Nichols: That's awesome. Well, and you also met the love of your life?

Knopp: I did, I did my husband of what will soon be 16 years. So had I not taken that one credit class, I may not have.

Nichols: Well, you just touch on something that I've always loved about you, because you do have a heart for things that are bigger than yourself, and always have had a heart to serve since I've known you and that's one of the many things I love about you, but one of the other things that I used to teach you about this all the time, because I saw you in action. I mean, I said, somebody could have a vision today. Tomorrow, Meredith comes back with the plan. And I love that you know how to execute on things and a lot of people have vision but really taking that vision to a reality something real and executable that's the art, I think. And you are just so good at that you're so good at that, so I'm not at all surprised that you're where you are today, but talk to us a little bit. You tell a story about a really special Christmas in Bosnia, tell us about that story, Meredith.

Knopp: Yeah, so long story short, we know I found myself in Bosnia, of all places, in 1996, we had just finished the first round of the elections, there so very formidable time for that country's history and we were overseas. And this is before Facebook and the internet. So if you wanted to correspond back home, it was a letter, it took two to three weeks to get there, two to three weeks to get a response. Well, long story short, we didn't happen to have a mission on Christmas Day but we were helping people in this little town called Mohalla rebuilt. And so I say, "Come on guys let's go. We happen to have a chow hall, which was a blessing. We've been eating MRE, meals ready to eat out of bags for a very long time.

So that was a blessing. So I said Guys, instead of sitting here being upset about what we don't have, let's get out there. And they were all kind of... Oh, come on. It's our day off loaded up the

trucks, we got the extra food from the chow hall. We went out there and we had been helping as I said, rebuild and it was fun because what we did that day, is we not really shared a meal and broke bread with these people, but we were trying to help them understand our culture, so I let them had a stack. Their M16s and M24s. But it was nice because they took their cans of Copenhagen, their dip. Picked up some 2x4s and started teaching this villager about American hockey and so it was this fun playful atmosphere for just a few hours and I remember at the end, a couple of my guys came up to me and they said, Thank you, and I said For what?.. And they said, for teaching us what Christmas was all about... And he said, "You know, we were up here, we were feeling sorry for ourselves but we get to go home at some point. For them. This is home." And so it kind of helped with things in perspective. So, I think life is all about perspective and anyone going to have trials and tribulations, but I think it's how you handle that. That really matters that perspective is important.

Nichols: Such great advice, and I'm just thinking as you had said, you could be so focused on yourself, and being away from your family, but sometimes getting out there and serving and focusing on other people is exactly what you need to do when you feel those things.

Knopp: It's very therapeutic. And I will tell you, I've seen it time and time again, putting the needs of others ahead of your own, helps not only the people that you're serving, but there's some help for yourself as well.

AD: Well we're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Meredith Knopp.

Nichols: So Meredith you were in the military for eight years, but then you made the decision to exit the military, and back into civilian life. And I know that you started for-profit and you spent some time there but very quickly you moved to the not-for-profit world. And I want to spend the bulk of our time there. What was your precipice for that?

Knopp: So I did, I went to the for-profit industry if you will, spend about five years there, but it wasn't doing it for me, for lack of a better term. I know this doesn't sound very polished, but there was something missing, and so I started doing volunteer opportunities with an organization called Junior Achievement, which I would end up working for thankfully, but I started doing job shadow and I loved those days and I realized that what was missing was my sense of purpose that what I was doing mattered, in the life of someone else.

I remember calling my husband and saying like, "Hey I'm going to quit my job. He's like, "Oh okay, I didn't know you were interviewing". Long story short. I ended up leaving fortunately was hired on to serve as a senior vice president of Junior Achievement here in St. Louis. Had a wonderful, wonderful experience, loved it, and co-founded an organization that's now its own non-profit called Heroes care, love that got recruited away to a different non-profit back in 2011 called The Mission Continues. Spent six and a half years there. And now I am very, very proud to say that last February, I was afforded the opportunity to serve as the President and CEO of St. Louis Missouri Foodbank.

Nichols: yes, I know. So you and I met at Junior Achievement. When I served on the board. The rest is history. So you are the CEO of the STL Foodbank. Let's talk about the STL Foodbank. Talk about the people that the food banks are, what's the mission? Why did you choose the food bank because you've had other opportunities? So talk about that a little bit.

Knopp: So we actually just went through an entire new strategic direction process at the STL Foodbank. And I could not be more proud of my team because they scripted, all of it, we had a ton of support from our Board of Directors. It was a great process.

So, I'm happy to tell you our new mission statement revived at the STL Foodbank. Building stronger communities by empowering people with food and hope. It's a very powerful mission statement it really, really speaks to you at a lot of different levels.

I know are organization. We serve 26 counties in Missouri and Illinois we have over 500 partner agencies that we support with our food. Last year, we distributed over 43.5 million pounds of food out of our location and Bridgeton. This doesn't happen just by happenstance. I have an incredible team that is just my family. I could not be more proud of them. As, you know, Technology Partners came out and did a volunteer day of service out there and we we're very, very grateful for that.

It's organizations like Technology Partners bring out almost 18000 people a year just to our facility that doesn't count the other work that we're doing on the ground, the community, and it certainly doesn't count all the great work of all of the soup kitchens. The pantries, the transitional housing, the shelters that are out there, they're on the front lines, really fighting against people who are hungry, and trying to inspire them and provide them an opportunity so that their tomorrow is better than their today.

Nichols: Well, I love the new mission statement and the whole piece. I mean, that is a basic need. If you do not have food. You are not going to be thriving. In education. So I want you to say that number again.

Knopp: 43.5 million pounds of food, last year alone. It is a lot of food. And like I said, it takes a lot of people working together. So we have an incredible crew, of drivers that are out on the road driving hundreds of miles every day, delivering food picking up food, making that happen it's our team in the warehouse, our inventory, our receiving team now, it's our marketing team, it's our agency relations team. It's my finance team, keeping everything on the books. My philanthropy team. It's everybody working together, it's my product sourcing team is everyone really coming together and they do it with such servant hearts, we talk about a lot, at the STL Foodbank about servant leadership.

Yeah, and it's about putting the needs of others ahead of your own, and it's such an honor, and it's humbling to be able to come to work knowing that what you're doing makes a difference and it's not announced about you

Nichols: Yeah, and when I think about you met... That is a common thread. You have a servant's heart, in serving our country and then all of the not-for-profit work that you've done, you really do that's a common thread with you. And what I see is, you got a special little girl in your life.

Knopp: I do. My beautiful daughter Abigail.

Nichols: Yeah, she's smart as a whip. That girl is... Oh my God, she's so smart, but I have seen you from the time that she was in her little bunk and seat. Abigail has been at your side, as you have served in these different capacities. Yeah, so how important do you think that is, for parents, today to model.

Knopp: It's critical, and I think it's a responsibility that you have as a parent. Abigail is, and will always be the blessing of my life and I always tell her, "you will always do what I am most proud of". But I can also tell you, since she was able to talk and walk it was Mommy. Where you going? I want to help. So whether it was out there at the age of three with a rake teaching people how to mulch... At the age of three and a half or four leading the Pledge of Allegiance in front of groups of hundreds of people so fearless absolutely fearless. I love it.

To even when I was deciding and determining this job to take at the food bank when I was telling her about it, she's like, "Well Mommy, why don't they just go to the grocery store? So it was very interesting for a 6 year old. And then for me as her mom to have to explain to her, not everybody is so fortunate to be able to drive up to the grocery store and that sometimes there are people who are faced with challenges. And she looked at me and she said, Mommy. That's not right and I said, "You're right, Sweetie it's not... She said so there's kids like me right now, they haven't eaten all day. I said, that's right". She's like Mom. You have to take this job, you have to fix this. And I was like So... And so she'll come out to the food bank and she'll pack boxes of food shall we pack produce and she gets people in working harder and she walks around the volunteer center and we'll say, "Well if you talk less, you could help more people.

I'm like, "Oh my goodness." But she had a good heart she means well and she's just waiting for the day she can drive in one of the trucks. I keep telling her, you got to get out of the car seat first, and then we'll get you in the semi.

Nichols: Yeah, I see that is so funny, that's so funny. Are going to take a driver's test in one of the semis in your fleet.

Knopp: But it is the answer your question more succinctly. It is the critical component that we're teaching those good behaviors that we're setting an example that we're role modeling. No one gets to pick and choose how they start life. You don't get to pick the city, the state, the date, the time, your parents, any of that, but you can certainly choose how you end it. I aspire to inspire her. That's what I do, that's what I want to do to her, and if that trickles down on others, then wonderful.

Nichols: I bet, she's building that into her little friends at school. I bet she comes back and talks about what she's doing at the STL Foodbank, and so she is inspiring I'm sure, already.

Knopp: She is. She does it with her friends and her kindergarten teacher actually sat me this week and said, "Hey I hear that you're over there. She said, "Can I come volunteer with you this summer? So, that was really powerful, because her kindergarten teacher is delightful last year.

Nichols: Well, good job, mom. Strong Mom, strong daughters. So tell me a little bit... So, if there is someone in our listening audience that says, Yes, I love the mission, of the food bank, this is a basic need, for people. I want to get involved. What could they do Meredith, how can they get involved?

Knopp: The easiest way is to go to our website, STLFoodBank.org. They can learn there about not only what we're doing now, but all of the things in our new 2025 strategic direction, there's lots of new programs, lots of new partnerships, lots of new collaborations, things that have never been done here before and that strategic plan will take us to our 50th anniversary in 2025, so already looking forward to that. But the food bank has a very, very rich history, and they have served so many people. I tell people that when they open their doors 43 years ago they were putting out about 135000 pounds of food a year, which is a lot. Right now, we're putting out about 174000 pounds a day.

So the need is there and there's lots of ways people can get involved in a myriad of different ways and we welcome everyone, any age, any ability, if you want to work, we'll put you to work. We had a group out there today, a first, second and third graders celebrate in her 100th day of school, and those kids were having a blast and we love them. So if you're willing to roll up your sleeves and make a difference. We can't do it without volunteers. Our community is an integral part of our team.

Nichols: And what you find so many times is when you go serve you think you're serving, but then you are the one that walks away blessed by doing that. So this is called something extra. I want to talk a little bit about that. Can you articulate something extra that you think that every leader needs or it can be something extra that you've seen in a team member or possibly a mentor?

Knopp: I believe that this something extra you need to really be the type of leader that you would want to follow is humility. I think that is at times a lost art. People, as they go up the chain and get those promotions or those titles if you will they think, Wow. Oh, I'm your leader on your boss, and that's not leadership and I really believe in, in having humility and putting other people first, I always love to hire and surround myself with people who are better than me, because they're going to make us all better. And that's really, really important, but I really view my role now as President and CEO, is to serve my team to help them become the best versions of themselves, and to really help them achieve their goals, paying it forward, doing what I can to help that next generation.

But I think it's a really important quality that people need to realize. You didn't get there on your own. I certainly didn't get to where I am without a lot of people investing time and me and mentors and sponsors along the way, and I am so eternally grateful and I could never think

them all for what they've done for me, but I think that's a very, very important quality that sometimes is lost.

Nichols: You always hear, you don't want to be the smartest person in the room. The organization is going to go so far right that it's going to stop at you. Well, so having that humility to say, "I don't know everything, right".

Knopp: It's so important, I... That's why I love the Food Bank and the team and the strategic direction they wrote that. I didn't write or script award of it. I've facilitated a conversation but they wrote it. That's their work. They are so bought in, and it was a great process for all of us. But yeah, you don't want to do that. You want to help people discover and really unlock their true potential because that's what we're getting all our great ideas. It's not from me, and it's why I tell people the minute it becomes about any one person, less of all me, we've lost. It's not about that it's... But something much bigger than yourself. And it's about the community that we serve in, in both Missouri, and Illinois, and it's about those kiddos that we see, it's about those families, those veterans those seniors that are receiving our help them people who saw recently with the government shut down not too long ago. So it's a difficult thing to have to ask for help.

So we want to always make sure we're treating people with dignity and with respect, and we treat them as family, and we're here. And so I could not be again, just more proud of my team for that. And I think being a servant-leader again putting the needs of others ahead of your own, there's no greater feeling in the world.

Nichols: Well, thank you for all that you're doing, thank you for your team STL Foodbank, thank you for all the people that are volunteering to help you guys accomplish your mission.

Knopp: Yes, thank you, to Technology Partners for all you and your team do and for spreading the good word and getting other people involved. Like I said, we're always looking for new corporations and individuals and volunteers and donors and people just want to come out or parents, you want to just set that good example for their kids, bring them out. We'd love to have them. I guarantee, you will have a fun experience doing it.

Nichols: Absolutely, well very good. Well, Meredith, thank you so much for being here. It's been so much fun.

Knopp: Thank you for inviting me.

