



After the Fact | Restoring Community: Breaking Bread

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TRANSCRIPT

Vincent Noth: How's everybody doing tonight? Good. Welcome to Kinship Community Food Center, where we are a community of generosity. That feels good. Feels good to hear y'all say that tonight. Community of generosity.

Dan LeDuc, host: Community and generosity are the hallmarks of the Kinship Community Food Center in Milwaukee. Vincent Noth and his staff and volunteers have transformed what was once a food pantry—where people in need came to pick up food and then leave—into a gathering place and, yes, a community of its own.

Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. There’s a lot of talk today about how fragmented American society has become, the lack of trust in institutions and each other. In fact, there are a lot of places where community is flourishing. Kinship is one of those places, and we visited Milwaukee to learn how they do it.

Vincent Noth started his work at Kinship a decade ago and now some 200 families pass through its doors each week. They have come to know each other. They share recipes and meals together. You could say Kinship is fighting hunger—in fact, it’s feeding souls.

Vincent: A quarter of all volunteerism in America is connected to hunger, but a lot of the spaces where people are receiving food, it’s just very transactional.

It's not that there's anything wrong with just distributing food. At Kinship Community Food Center, we just want to focus on building relationships through food. If we make it about relationships, everything can change.

Community Member: I never told you, but ever since I listened to your advice,

Vincent: What did I say?

Community Member: I've been all right.



Vincent: What did I say?

Community Member: It was the people you said I hang with.

Vincent: That's what I said. I said you need, I said you need some new friends. Oh. I can't believe I said that.

Community Member: Well, you, you was honest, man. So I turned out better. I'm a better person. These are my great grandkids.

Vincent: Who are these two beauties?

Dan: It was market night when we visited. A couple of times a week, the Kinship community gathers in the basement of St. Casimir Church, in Milwaukee's Riverwest neighborhood. They are greeted with baskets of fresh apples, broccoli, potatoes, and seasonal vegetables like pumpkin and squash—much of it grown at Kinship's own urban farm not far away. And there are meats and cereals—all the makings for a healthy meal. Everyone gets a chance to collect some food to take home. But no one is rushing to get out of here because it'll be time for dinner soon.

A decorative chalkboard announces the evening's menu:

Homemade meatloaf and veggie loaf, a cheesy roasted vegetable mash, green tomato and pepper salad, and, for dessert, a glossy peanut butter chocolate cake.

Vincent: This is a homemade chocolate cake right here.

Dan: All served up by volunteers who know almost everyone's name. And those who aren't known are greeted and made at ease at the long tables where everyone eats.

Vincent: Hi, I'm Vincent. Pleasure to meet you. Oh, cool. So, just arrived.

Community Member: Yes.

Vincent: Cool. Welcome. Welcome to the community.

Dan: There's pop music blaring from speakers. Friends gathering in clumps to talk. Kids have their own corner with crafts.



Vincent: I love you, man. Nice to meet you, too. How you doing? I saw, I saw you in prayer this morning.

Community Member: Yeah.

Vincent: Saw you sneaking in. A sign to me of like, you're doing well, you know?

Community Member: Yeah. I was like, I have 10 minutes. I can go, I can not go ...

Vincent: Ten minutes is 10 minutes, man. It felt good. I'm sure it did.

Dan: Vincent and his staff and volunteers seem to have a sixth sense about the people who come to Kinship; they can almost anticipate their feelings and needs.

Vincent: Every time we open those doors, whether you've met the person or not, there are people in this space right now that might be going through the hardest, lowest point, right? Of their year, of their decade.

Orlando: It was stressful. It was really stressful because you get to know him so well and then your heart gets in the way. But I had to do what I had to do and stuff like that.

Vincent: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Orlando: Yeah. Can I get like five minutes of your time?

Vincent: Yeah. You wanna go sit and talk?

Orlando: Yes.

Dan: Orlando is a volunteer at Kinship. He hasn't been around for a while and wanted to check in with Vincent.

Vincent: This is Orlando, and you should have interviewed him today instead of me. That's all I gotta say. This is one of my, one of my teachers here.

Orlando: For me, you know, I've been through so much situations since I was a kid, how I came up with gang banging, drug dealing, drug using, that was my life. I thought that was it. So that's how I gotta live. But something in me was telling me, there's



something else out there, I was always trying to find something to help me. And I knew there was an answer out there somewhere, but I couldn't find it, and people was always directing me to different places, and it was just going in circles and I couldn't find it.

Orlando: That's when I ended up looking for a treatment center. Came over here and then I had this guy, Carl. Carl was like my little big brother. He just pushed me. He would not stop. He would say, "I'm not going to leave you alone."

Dan: Orlando met Carl through a group called 4th Dimension, which helps people going through substance abuse treatment. Orlando's new friend changed his life.

Orlando: Every phone call that I called, he picked it up. There was times that I wanted to leave. There was times that I wanted to relapse, and he'll be the No. 1 person I'll call, and he'll come 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and come get me. Come find me.

Every morning you'll wake up. We go to church, we go to the lake, we'll go to yoga, we'll go rock climbing. We were doing things that I never thought I will ever do. I'm from a different place. There's no such thing rock climbing or Frisbee golfing.

From there, there was a saying that came in my head that I always tell everybody: that if I want the things I never had, if I want to go to places that I never been, meet people that I always wanted to meet, I gotta start doing the things I've never done. So, I gotta start saying yes to yes and no to no, I gotta start being open-minded, start taking advice and start going forward.

Vincent: And he told me you have the hardest job description of anyone.

Orlando: I'm there 24/7.

Dan: Orlando is now working with 4th Dimension, which is partnering with Kinship to help those in the neighborhood who need it.

Vincent: He's in the program—it's a six-month program, but he's also building manager now. So, there's a lot of folks that come in and they're coming right out of prison, or they're coming right out of a serious struggle with an addiction. It could be an opioid addiction. And then they're in community.



Vincent: What should the system invest in someone like Orlando? What's the line? Where's the program line? Where you go, "Well, sorry, this is the program you qualify for, but after four months, we can't help you anymore."

The line for us, the line we're trying to build up—we're trying to build a program that says, "There's no end to that." Like he's gonna become a family with us, and we're gonna walk through what his dream and his goal is because he's rebuilding his life. And I'm so excited to get going. You know what I mean?

Orlando: I am, too. When you called me, you told me that, I'm like, "Yeah! Yeah, of course."

Vincent: You can't think about hunger without thinking about the fact that a quarter of the families that shop with us are paying up to 70% of their monthly income on rent. There's a lot of underemployed people in the community that are really struggling. One-third of all Americans make less than \$15 an hour. So it's fantastic, to save that family a hundred bucks on groceries is noble. It's great. But you're doing nothing to address the underlying issue of the terrible rental situation. You're doing nothing to address their social isolation.

Dan: And while food is central to the Kinship community, the place is also about the coming together of people—people often from very different backgrounds.

Sam: I got to know you, Lauren, because you were getting to know me. You wanted to tell me about your kids, and you wanted to tell me what was going on, I just felt, whoa. She like trusts me and I don't really know what I did to earn that trust. Like, oh yeah, I think we're friends.

Lauren: We are friends.

Dan: Sam is from a small town in Wisconsin where everyone knows each other and she moved to the Riverwest neighborhood, and when you hear her laugh, you understand why she also has gotten to know a lot of people here.

Lauren: I noticed Sam's laugh first and foremost above everything else.

Dan: Lauren is a mother of two who also fosters other children. She's lived in Milwaukee her whole life.



Lauren: And just how outgoing and just, she's my angel cuz she is, she's just an angel. The funny part is she always knows when something's wrong with me, whether I tell her or not, it just outta nowhere. She'll call me like, "Hey, you wanna hang out?" I'm like, how did she know I needed her right now? Like, and every time, yep, I'll be there.

Sam: I was like, okay, if I volunteer at a place like this, I want it to be about relationship and like friendship.

Lauren: I'm thankful for people like this who don't judge me or treat me different or my children different cuz they're mixed or because of this or that.

The first time I met her I needed extra help. I had my first daughter, and I was going through rough times, and she was there for me. Everybody has more needs than just needing food, especially when you don't have a big family. I'm lucky because they adopted me and my children. It's more than that. I just didn't know I needed the friends. So, that's a beautiful thing I'm thankful for.

Sam: I think that there's this real desire these days to go back to like local everything because we've realized that we've disconnected ourselves so intensely.

Lauren: I believe what goes around comes around, and that if we treat each other right, it'll come back to us.

Vincent: So, someone help me out tonight. Can I get, can I get someone to just raise their hand and volunteer what it means to be a community of generosity in this space tonight?

Dan: Kinship addresses hunger in the community. But it also works toward filling that need for human connection. It's true for those who need the food services here, and it's just as true, Vincent says, for the volunteers who may have their own struggles with isolation and loneliness and need for a sense of purpose. What they've learned here is that everyone who comes to the table has something to offer.

Vincent: There's a real poverty that we see the oppression and the marginalization has caused 'em to feel really excluded from participation. There's also a poverty that is about the belief that everything that I have achieved in my life, I've achieved all on my own.



Natalie: My name's Natalie Ross. I am soon to be 31 years old, and I've been in Riverwest for a few years now.

I've bounced around a lot and always was always looking for a place to land. But I came to Milwaukee for grad school and a job. It didn't really pan out cuz I am a recovering alcoholic and addict and had a bunch of untreated mental health stuff going on at the time.

But I realized I wanted to do right by the people I love. So, I got sober, all that stuff. And I used to live just like a block down the street from here. I was like, well, I'm like seven months sober. I don't know how to interact with people because of like anxiety sobriety, but also, I need to do something, and food is how I know how to love.

That's it. So, I started volunteering here on Friday mornings and it just made sense. And then August. I'd been like wanting this full-time staff position. And it's scary to want things. It's really scary to have hope, right? That things could be better, or that I could be enough for something, or that somebody could want me.

But they told me about the job right after the catering event. And I was like so exhausted and burnt out and like covered meatballs and sauce and just couldn't even process it at the time. And then it hit me. I was walking home, and I just started like sobbing.

Isaac: I've been living here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, almost my entire life.

Dan: Isaac is 13 and a regular at Kinship.

Isaac: Before the pandemic hit, actually, I was like at a low in my life and I like isolated myself. And then pandemic hit, so that just added further insult to the injury.

My mom, she sat down with me and just asked if I was OK, if I was going through something and we talked, had a long conversation, and she just really melted my heart. My mom, she's been coming to this pantry, getting food, and she was telling me the experience that she had, everybody was so nice. They were so fun. The energy was just so positive.

Natalie: We met at a feast meal. And I was like, who is this child? And then you're part of the catering crew for the fundraising event.

Isaac: I remember that fundraiser. It was fun.



Dan: And now Natalie and Isaac are friends.

Isaac: This like my second mother. Yeah.

Natalie: Oh, really? Wow.

Isaac: Actually.

Natalie: Well, you're always commenting on my wrinkles and my gray hair.

Isaac: It's emphasis on the gray hair. But we're getting there.

Natalie: Okay. Every wrinkle I have is cause of you, Isaac.

Isaac: I have a tendency to drive people crazy. I still remember burning a bridge with Mike.

Natalie: OK, you didn't burn a bridge, but you just have a personality and a sense of humor that like the delivery ...

Dan: Last fall, Natalie helped Isaac prepare for his audition to attend the Milwaukee High School of the Arts, a big-deal place to try to get accepted to around here.

Isaac: I was like so nervous, but we weren't even halfway through the audition until he said I was in, and my heart just stopped. I for sure got into dance. And then the acting department. I did a monologue from "Hidden Figures." And I did actually two. So, I did like the original and then they wanted me to do like one that was like a spinoff, like my own version, more calmer, more stable, like sitting down like how I am right now.

At first, I was scared cause I'm like, "Oh, OK, maybe I did like bad." And they were completely stunned. Like speechless. And I'm just OK. I did good. I know I got into both departments.

Natalie: Pitter patter. I feel like a little like Mother Goose.

Isaac: This community like melted me because after I was like going through the process of doing the audition, everyone was just like, cheering me on. They was just



like helping me through it and I was just like, “Why is everybody like helping me?” I don't usually get this kind of attention.

Natalie: But it's like support that doesn't stop or doesn't go away. And I think that's what I was always expecting coming into here was like you're nice, you're helping me. Like I came in as a volunteer, like newly sober and then I was an intern. Now I'm staff, like whole thing.

And I was like, all right, but when's it gonna stop? When's the other shoe gonna drop? When is the love or support or when am I gonna be too much?

'Cause I think it's folks, including myself, who you know, are the most isolated or think that they could never be loved that really need that the most. And it can be so hard to show that sometimes to people who you think are so different. But that's where you can really lean in and challenge yourself, because we all want somewhere to belong and we all just wanna be loved.

Dan: Somewhere to belong is the essence of what a community offers, and it's that feeling of belonging that Kinship has created.

Bernard: I used to not want to be around people during holidays because I don't have family here it would pain me to be around other people that did have families to get together with and stuff like that. So, I would just avoid it altogether.

Dan: Bernard Madison is both a staff member and volunteer at Kinship. We talked with him after Thanksgiving, and he told us he had his holiday dinner with his friends there.

Bernard: This past Thanksgiving was a blessing cause everybody was there. It was happy, it was joyful, it was good food. It made me feel like a human again as part, as far as being a part of something again. Family, peaceful.

Vincent: We see one another, we encounter one another with compassion with them, no matter what kind of love and compassion, because we recognize that those people, especially those that have carried heavy burdens, those that are in the fight right now, have so much to give and so much to teach.

Community Member: That was nice.

Vincent: What was nice?



Community Member: Everything you say.

Vincent: Oh, thank you.

Community Member: I be coming back. This is my first time, so I'm—

Vincent: This is your first time here?

Community Member: Yeah, I'm so excited.

Vincent: Get some dinner. This, we, we, we don't, we don't mess around. This is a homemade chocolate cake right here.

Vincent: Anyone can go and build Kinship. Anyone can go to their neighborhood meal site—not to perform a duty or to fix someone or fix something—but just to go build a relationship to encounter someone. And they can do it as an act of weaving, of rebuilding solidarity in the community.

Lauren: People are so sucked into their phone in the social world and social media that they're forgetting that your neighbor could be cold and hungry and sad, or, that picture isn't how it is every day. Luckily, the pantry is completely the opposite.

Dan: That's Lauren, from earlier.

Lauren: I know everyone there, they know me, they know my children, and that's one of the few places that I can just be OK and know my kids are OK.

We look forward to coming twice a week. And my kid loves to cook and it's because of not just me, but the pantry, too. They give her that opportunity where I'm mom and I'm like, "Oh, you're gonna cut yourself or gonna burn yourself." But you gotta let 'em, you gotta let 'em learn.

And I used to be very large. I used to weigh like 330, 340 pounds, and when I had my daughter, I was like, "I want to be better. I want to be here for her." So, I also wanted them to be more healthy and think more consciously. They've gotten me outta my shell to that as well. I know how to cook a lot of things.

Dan: Is there any other place like Kinship?



Lauren: No, not at all. I look at them like my family, like, “Call me, I got you.” But, I've never always had that back. With them, I receive that back every time I'm there. I get a hug. “What’s wrong? You look down today.”

Nobody else cared that I look down today, and that means the world to me. It was more than just food. It was friends. It was just, cooking together, eating together.

Vincent: I think people are naturally hungry for this, but there's shame associated with that hunger, if it's unmet. I think there's a feeling of “I should be okay. I shouldn't feel lonely, or I shouldn't feel isolated.”

A lot of times people don't know the hunger is there until they're in our center and they come up to one of our team members and they go, “What is it about this place?” “Well, what are you talking about?” And they say, “I feel such warmth here. I feel such fulfillment here.” What's happening? It's our job to just help them find the flow of that.

Dan: You can learn more about the Kinship Community Food Center at our website, pewtrusts.org/after-the-fact. And we'll have more on building community in our next episode.

Thomas: If you want to know your neighbor, then say hello to your neighbor. You see your neighbor struggling, you say, “Hey, let me give him a hand.” That builds trust, and that's what Project HOME does.

Dan: In Philadelphia, you can find community even when you don't have a place to call home. It's called Project HOME. We hope you'll join us.