

Smart from the Start Director Cherie Craft on supporting families in need during a high-stress time

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello, and welcome to Big and Little. The podcast of Boston Children's Museum.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Cherie Craft, executive director of family support and community engagement organization Smart from the Start has dedicated her career to promoting the healthy development of underserved kids and families in Boston and Washington D.C. In today's episode, Carole talks with Cherie about the work of Smart from the Start and the importance of both family and community members in supporting kids healthy development, especially in these difficult times amid the coronavirus pandemic.

CHERIE CRAFT: I wouldn't do this work if I didn't believe that there is hope. It is up to us to believe and then to put behind that belief and that hope some real action.

PRODUCER: Without further ado, Carol and Cheri, take it away.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Hello, and welcome to the Big and Little podcast from Boston Children's Museum. I am so honored to have with me today Cheri Craft who is the founder and CEO of Smart from the Start, Inc, which is an outstanding community engagement organization that promotes the healthy development of kids and families living in Boston and in Washington D.C. And at Smart, Cheri, you lead programs that recognize and build on the strengths of children and parents and families and creating great opportunities for their growth and success.

I also wanted to mention that Cherie is on the senior faculty of the Institute for patient and family care. And Cherie, we know you are widely recognized as a leading authority on this extraordinary work you do, multi-generational work with children and families, and we're just so delighted to have you here today. Thank you so much for being with us.

CHERIE CRAFT: Thank you, Carole. It is such a pleasure to join you this afternoon.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Thank you. So I think we should start by asking you to please tell our listeners a bit about yourself and about the amazing organization have founded and led for many years, Smart from the Start.

CHERIE CRAFT: Well, my story begins, Carole, in a low income housing community much like the communities that our children and families live in. I grew up between the inner cities of Boston and Washington D.C. with two great parents who provided us with a lot of love and a lot of stability, but didn't have a lot of money. And I think that most of the values and my passion for community where it came from my parents who were very active members of their communities.

And I grew up really committed to social justice and to finding a way to use whatever platform I was led with to give back to communities like the one I grew up in. And so my professional background is in social work and counseling psychology, and I did that work for a very long time in places like City Hospital and for the Administration for Children and Families.

And because of the insight and the innovation of Mayor Thomas Menino, was able to found and start Smart from the Start about 13 years ago in the city of Boston. And about seven years ago, had the opportunity to expand to Washington D.C.

CAROLE CHARNOW: That's extraordinary. In doing my reading and what I know of your work as we work together with you, I know you really are working on the strengths-based approach to engaging families, and I also know that you work with parents for their own growth as well as kids, which is really quite unique. Can you say a little bit about that?

CHERIE CRAFT: Sure. So what we know and what the research tells us is you can't serve a young child in isolation from their family, and you can't serve a family in isolation from their community. So if our goal is really to break generational cycles of school underachievement and generational poverty, we had to employ more of an ecological and holistic approach, which means we provide support for children, we provide opportunities for families, and we employ strategies to weave a tighter safety net in our community so the children and families have the kind of broad range support that they need.

And the whole notion of being strength-based is really about making a paradigm shift from social services historic approach to working with families for more of a deficit-based medical model where we, kind of, diagnose what's wrong with families, and then prescribe kind of a way to fix that, and instead recognizing that every child and every family, every community has incredible strengths and resources within themselves and just need to be introduced to those strengths and given the resources they need to build on them and break cycles themselves and to set [INAUDIBLE] goals for their own self sufficiency.

CAROLE CHARNOW: That is so, so encouraging. I've been to your center in Boston. I haven't been to the center in Washington D.C. And I just wonder if you could give our listeners a glimpse of what they would see if they walked in to your wonderful environment.

CHERIE CRAFT: So we have a saying at Smart from the Start that we want folks to feel, when they walk into our centers, like they're at home. And so many years ago, I was a family advocate at Boston City Hospital and one parent said to me-- and it stayed with me for the rest of my career-- is when she walked off elevator on the pediatrics floor at Boston City Hospital, the City Hospital then, she felt what she was walking on her father's land at home in Ghana, which is where she was from.

And we had decided early on that when folks walk into our centers, we want them to feel like they're walking on their father's land. So when folks walk into a Smart from the Start center no matter where it is, whether it's in Boston, in Roxbury, or Jamaica Plain, or South Boston or Charlestown, or if it's in Washington D.C. and Southeast Ward 8, they feel like they're at home.

We create a very warm environment that's full of fun things for children and families to do with beautiful, comfortable furniture on the walls. There are affirmations for families telling them how wonderful they are, telling them that the strength they seek is in themselves, and that there's always food to eat, there's always a cup of coffee for mom or milk or something for the children.

And we really want our center to be a nurturing environment, because many of the families that are living in very challenging situations and they need to be nurtured.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Yes, that's just such-- there's so much love and caring that comes through your description and your centers. I know that you have, on your website, this great video done by the Center on the Developing Child that really talks about this theory of change related to child outcomes by building these adult capabilities as you described it. Can you talk a bit about what kinds of skills parents, caregivers, and educators need to work on to help their children deal with all the challenges that they have?

CHERIE CRAFT: So there are really two theories of change that we employ when it comes to supporting and working with families. Number one, we believe that a child's most important teacher and advocate is

their parents and they're their first, right? So we want to make sure that our families feel confident stepping into that role as their child's first teacher. And what we know is when families are facing difficulties and challenges, they often don't recognize the importance and the important role that they play and the role of their children.

They think, I'm going to feed my child, I'm going to make sure that they're safe and that they have somewhere to lay their head, but they don't realize that school doesn't begin when they enter the school building. Learning begins at home. And so we want to make sure that our families feel confident, that they understand that it doesn't take any money to be an outstanding first teacher for their children.

We do a lot of work around introducing families to the basics of child development, to working with them around the importance of play, around recognizing developmental milestones, and how every moment with a child can be a great learning experience. We talk about [INAUDIBLE] and holding hands and playing I-spy on a T, or when they're riding public transportation and how important those things are.

We even talk with families who have difficulty reading about how to share a book by reading the pictures so that families feel really empowered to step into that role and to be proactive so that what we're doing at home is creating environment, learning environments, that are full and enriching every waking hour for a child. And then the other thing is we provide opportunities for families to engage in employment and education attainment.

So we have GED classes, and we have ESOL classes, and we have professional development and enrichment so that folks can gain career skills so that they can enter or re-enter the workforce and provide for their children as well. And what I didn't mention is that all of our programs are trauma informed, and we know that there's a great deal of undiagnosed and untreated trauma in the communities that we serve. And so we have created programs under this Address the Stress program that helps to address the stigma around mental and behavioral health in our community and introduce families to really high quality, culturally responsive trauma informed programs and services so that our families are learning how to engage in healing, and they're doing so in a way that feels affirming and feels respectful and helpful.

CAROLE CHARNOW: That's remarkable. You mentioned the issue of healing. Now we're going to come to talk about the pandemic in a moment. But first of all, all the themes you've touched on are related to equity and social justice. And I know that you have been a very fervent advocate for equity and justice for families. We are in a very trying time, and I just wonder if you could say a bit about what families that you are serving, are dealing with and how Smart from the Start is really partnering with them to find their own healing and strength during this difficult moment?

CHERIE CRAFT: Smart from the Start has kind of been at the forefront of what we're calling [INAUDIBLE] Civil Rights movement for a very long time. And we have been working in the trenches with our families and our community partners to confront discrimination and inequality in all its forms across so many societal sectors in education, in health care, in housing, in benefits entitlement.

And this new civil unrest, and this new civil rights movement has given us, I think-- maybe because of the pandemic, but has given us, I think, a platform now to really have some of those long standing historic systemic policies and procedures that have really held back for many of our children and families to have them reexamined, to confront them in different ways.

And my family leadership team and our staff have launched a new initiative that we're calling Justice for All. And Justice for All is really our opportunity to partner with folks of good intentions from across community and across different perspectives to promote equity and equality and justice for all to ensure

that our children have equal access to the American dream, and I honestly don't think that they have up until this moment.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Wow. I'm so glad you're working now in D.C. because I think we need your voice at the highest levels of government. I don't know if you've considered public service in that respect, but you certainly are serving our public. You did touch a bit on, again, health and healing, and I did want to turn for a moment to the pandemic. So we know that this terrible crisis has had a disproportionate and devastating impact on the families you serve.

Can you just speak from the standpoint of your position as a leader, how are we doing not only in Boston, but in the country in addressing these inequities and really making sure that our communities under a great deal of stress are really getting access to the resources they need to combat the pandemic in their own neighborhoods?

CHERIE CRAFT: I'm glad you asked. So when the pandemic first hit, I believe that some of our partners were among the first to shut down in-person programming and to begin to serve families on Zoom and some teleprogramming, and that was the first thing that we did. And simultaneously, we leveraged all of our support thanks to both mayors' offices.

Mayor Walsh jumped right in Mayor Muriel Bowser as well and her administration to make sure that Smart from the Start and had resources since it's widely recognized that we are on the ground where families-- where families are and where the families in the greatest need live. And what we've been doing since we first shut down in March is delivering groceries to our families, delivering PPE to our families, making sure they have diapers, making sure they have formula, over-the-counter medicines when they need that. We've been paying people's rent when it's necessary, making sure that folks have tablets and have their cell phones on so that they can stay connected to schools and to social service providers like ourselves. We've been providing families with tele-tutoring program. So we started a tele-tutoring program in March where we were able to recruit almost 60 volunteers to provide our kids, preschool through 12th grade, with tele-tutoring at least once a week.

And our partners with Jump Start and Teach for America have been instrumental in making sure that we were able to meet the needs of every child who requested a tutor. And so we've done that. And then the other thing that we've been able to do rather successfully besides continuing all of our programming from prenatal to baby basics, to play to learn groups online, we've also continued our focusing on fatherhood program that keeps us connected to young fathers in the community and our Address the Stress program which provides individual family and group therapy in multiple languages to families on Zoom and on the telephone.

So we jumped right in as soon as we could, we leveraged resources from many of our foundation partners, but particularly from our city wide partners and we're able to provide families with the basic needs-- meet their basic needs but then also make sure that our kids didn't suffer from learning loss and making sure that our little ones had activity packets and crayons and coloring books and so forth at home. And then just making sure that to what extent possible that we were reducing the social isolation that is such a great risk factor for depression and mental health by staying connected with our families even on Zoom. And so it's been difficult, but our families really have really been pleased with the way that we've been able to provide support for them.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I think it's breathtaking the scope of your work. I mean, you are really essentially looking after educational needs, health needs, basic needs, mental health, food insecurity. I mean, you

are essentially a complete 360 community service agency, and I just don't know how you do it. How do you do it?

CHERIE CRAFT: I mean, I think part of it is-- I had this conversation earlier with a partner at the Medical Legal Partnership for Children is that we're very careful about capacity, and while there are so many other places that we would like to implement Smart from the Start services, we've been very, very careful about expansion. And so we've been intentional in terms of going deeper in the communities where we work instead of trying to go too broad.

We realize that the holistic and comprehensive approach of Smart is what is-- is probably what is the biggest catalytic element for our families is the fact that we are a one stop shopping and that we build relationships with families that have, as a foundation, mutual respect and trust in that strength-based approach. And with that kind of relationship, we're able to provide them with all of the tools and resources they need to set and achieve their goals, and we couldn't do that if we were trying to spread ourselves too thin.

So we are right in the middle of the city of Boston. We serve eight neighborhoods there. We've been there for a long time and the same thing in D.C. We are embedded in the community of Ward 8 and [INAUDIBLE] and Woodland Park, and we have no plans, no illusions of grandeur. We have no plans to go any broader until every child and family in those neighborhoods is served, and I think that's the secret sauce.

I don't think there's any magic to what we do except that we realize that our families are incredible and our children are born smart from the start. They're just brilliant, but they just-- they need equity, they deserve equality and in high quality programs and services that help to level the playing field.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Wow. Well, we are very lucky to have you in Boston. I'm sure you are very up to speed on the controversy around child care provision preschool, and of course, school in the fall and the complexity of this issue related to learning loss as you mentioned earlier, of course, the mental health of children and families. Many parents struggling to work and home school and see to their kids needs. What advice would you have for our listeners who are, like your families, juggling all these different aspects of life? How would you help them or suggest to them some ways of getting through this very difficult time?

CHERIE CRAFT: You know, Carole, as a single mother of five children myself, I often put myself in my family's shoes. Now it's been a long time since I've had the same kinds of challenges that our families are struggling with today, but I've been there and not in the throes of a global pandemic. I certainly understand where they are now and what their concerns and priorities are, and my advice to families is to go with your gut.

And I've had this conversation. We have a very powerful family leadership team, and we've been talking about this issue for the past several weeks. I feel like there is just so much that's unknown and particularly in communities of color where the majority of our families live. There is research that says that this pandemic is disproportionately affecting children and adults of color.

And we don't know what the long term prognosis is even if these are not fatalities. We don't know whether or not testing is as accurate and as widespread as it should be. So we're not even sure how many of our children may be carriers of this pandemic, and so I encourage family to take every precaution. And if they feel strongly that they do not want their children to go to school, that they should be able to articulate that,

they should feel that they have every right to articulate that and make sure that the school systems are responsive to that request so that the children are still being taught.

The other thing is that we've got to make sure that we're meeting the basic needs of our families. We need to extend the eviction ban so that families can stay in their homes. We need to be prepared to deal with that back rent when the eviction ban is over. And Boston and D.C. are both resource rich cities, and I realize that tax revenue is down and so forth, but there are a lot of philanthropic organizations that should be supporting those of us who are on the ground and who are serving families so that they don't have to make a choice between feeding their kids and keeping them safe.

And that is my-- I'm on my soapbox now so that is my call to folks in the philanthropic community is that this is not a choice that low income parents should have to make. Families that have resources, are able to bring in a tutor or bring in someone to watch their children and our families don't have those resources, but they should not have to choose between feeding their children and keeping them safe.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Yeah, I'm glad you got on your soapbox because one thing I was going to ask you was what would you say to our civic, our government leaders, our health leaders to get their attention to address these issues that are disproportionately affecting families of color? I know that in the city of Boston, for example, more testing centers have been set up and more health supports have been put in place.

But what else would you recommend to not only our mayor but mayors across the country, governors and of course, our federal leaders as well as they start planning their resource distribution as it relates to the pandemic?

CHERIE CRAFT: You know, what I would say is this, is I would encourage them to do what I've done. Put your feet in the little shoes of the children and families that we're serving. Take a walk in your mind's eye through the challenges that they're dealing with. And then as you think about how to appropriate resources to do so in a way that will provide the kind of equity and equality and service provision that has been lacking for so many, not just decades, but centuries in this country where families and communities have traditionally been living in under-resourced environments.

This is a global pandemic, and I understand that resources are very tight, but whatever we have to give should go to those who are in the greatest need. And I have to commend-- I do commend both mayors of our city, because they have reappropriated funds, they have driven funds to the ground, to the community, but they can't do it alone. They need help from the state, and they certainly need help from the federal government, particularly in D.C. where they have the power on the purse strings to get off of the sidelines and get on the front lines of this pandemic.

This never should have gone this far. This never should have gotten this [INAUDIBLE] And those who are suffering are the little children in these communities who are already under-resourced.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Yes, absolutely. I've been so inspired by your posts as well, I wanted to say. For those of you who have not visited the Smart from the Start website, you will get a lot of inspiration and knowledge and information from Cherie and her staff. I'd love to keep you on all day, but I know you're so busy. I did want to just ask you a little bit about hope. And I know that having raised your children and having dedicated your life to making lives better for so many other children and families, you must be an extremely positive and hopeful person.

And I know that people listening are struggling, and what kind of hope could you leave people with?

CHERIE CRAFT: Carole, this nation has been through some of the darkest times in our history, and somehow, somehow the triumph of the American spirit has pulled us through. As a young black family myself and my five children, we have grown up hearing stories of pain and trauma and of triumph-- of triumph and the ability to pull together in difficult times and overcome some of the most difficult challenges, and I see that on the ground every day.

I see families that are sharing their food packages with their neighbors. I see folks who are going to the store for their elderly neighbors and making sure that when it's hot outside, they have a fan or have what they need. I see folks who don't have anything at all just sharing a kind word and uplifting each other.

There is nothing more inspirational than looking into the eyes of the face of a giggling child who's blowing a bubble or playing with a hula hoop and saying, listen, it's my job to make sure that the world goes on. It is my job to make sure that you are all right and that every opportunity that you deserve is afforded to you. And there are so many great people like the folks-- our friends at the Children's Museum that have been here since the very beginning that are all pulling together and making the world a better place for our children every day. I wouldn't do this work if I didn't believe that there was hope.

I see young men that have been beaten up in the system since they were little boys, that have been in juvenile justice facilities and in adult justice facilities that come home and turn their entire lives around because somebody believes in them. What I would say to everybody is when you feel the least hopeless, reach out and help somebody, and it will restore your faith in humanity.

I feel like we have an election coming up, and I don't want to get political, but it's time for everybody to choose. We need to choose which direction we want this country to go in. We need to choose how we are going to deal with this pandemic head on or if we're going to believe it's going to disappear. It is up to us to believe and then to put behind that belief and that hope for real action. And that could be anything as small as looking out for somebody who lives next door, or a kind word to a stranger, to casting your ballot, to getting involved in PTO or on a resident council, to running for office.

And we all have a responsibility to pull together, and I believe that we have every reason to be hopeful, because that is the history of America. We are far from a perfect union, but I feel like we're pushing forward every day and we have to continue to push particularly in the difficult times like the times that we're living in now.

CAROLE CHARNOW: I am so moved and inspired by you. I just want to say to our listeners, as soon as we finish this conversation, I'm going to go on Cherie's website and make a donation. I don't normally make-- I don't normally make pitches at the end of the podcast, but I really feel that the work you're doing is just heaven sent to so many and your words, the way you articulate your mission and your hope and belief in humanity and in American society is just so inspiring. If people did want to make a donation and join me, how would they do that, Cherie?

CHERIE CRAFT: Oh, thank you, Carole. First, I just want to say thank you so much, and thank you to the Children's Museum. I remember bringing my own children to the Children's Museum and the exhibits on the communities where they could go in and sit in a barber shop that looked like the communities where we grew up in. The work that you're doing is so important as well, and we've got to-- we actually have families that are going to be socially distancing at the Children's Museum next week so we're really excited--

CAROLE CHARNOW: I'm so glad that worked out. Great. Great. Great.

CHERIE CRAFT: Yes, yes. So it is a wonderful opportunity to get them out in a safe way to enjoy and continue to learn. But for those who would like to contribute to our mission, the easiest way to do that is to go on our website, which is www.smartfromthestartinc.org or look on our website. You're welcome, if you're not comfortable going online, to send us a contribution through the mail at our citywide site in Boston.

That address is on the website. And if you'd like to volunteer and [INAUDIBLE] or contribute diapers or playthings, we also can arrange that. Our phone number is on the website, and we would be happy to work with anyone who's interested in pitching in and helping out.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Well, I can't imagine one person that is not going to be inspired to get involved in some way. I just want to thank you so much, Cherie Craft, for this remarkable interview and the extraordinary work you're doing for children and families here and elsewhere. And I want to wish you and your children well during this pandemic and may we all come through it healthy and strong and stronger, and better for our kids and our families. Thank you so much for being with us on the Big and Little podcast.

CHERIE CRAFT: Thank you for having me. It has been a joy as always, Carole--

CAROLE CHARNOW: Thank you. You too. All the very best.

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PRODUCER: Thanks for listening. That's it for Big and Little today. To learn more or to send a donation to Smart from the Start, visit their website at www.smartfromthestartinc.org. We'll be back soon with another episode of Big and Little, so make sure to follow us wherever you get your podcasts.

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