Watts Leadership Institute

**Audio Clip #1:**

Karrah Lompa: I don't think either of us realized how long that building trust among a group of six in the inaugural cohort would take. That group norming that we've all experienced. But coming from a community where they all knew who the others were, some were very, very close. Some had only heard of others. It's not just new people coming together. There’s been a lot of scarcity of resource. There's been a lot of mistrust. There's been a lot of pitting one against another by external sources. And so I would venture to say that with the inaugural cohort, we spent more than a year just building on that piece. Yes, we had meetings that talked about budgets. Yes, we had meetings that talked about fundraising. But what we ended up doing in those meetings was really developing the fabric of that cohort and helping them get to know one another, trust one another, and then begin to collaborate with one another.

**Audio Clip #2:**

Karrah Lompa: So just a tidbit about Your Special Day. Jackie Evans is the mother and co founder. Shekalia Johnson, her daughter, and co-founder Jackie grew up in a household where her father was chronically ill and unable to fully focus on being a father because he had so many health issues. And that really affected Jacque in growing up and as then a mother herself, she wanted to make sure that children in families that had parents with disabilities and chronic illness, that there were moments of joy focused on those children, as well as resources for those families to be family, whether it's education or nutrition or any number of activities that could be provided to a family with this unique set of needs. So Jacque and Shekalia established Your Special Day.

When we were going through the identification of community leaders and organizations for Cohort 2, we met them. They were wonderful. Shekalia was like, "Please, please, please bring me and I need this. We want this. We are ready." And they were just right there ready to go and take the leap into whatever was next for their organization. So that's who Your Special Day is.

As Jorja has mentioned, Adrian Acosta, a member of the inaugural cohort, he’s an educator. He was special ed teacher for many years in Watts. But he has a different plan and he left traditional classroom education because of his need to provide different services for children and families. Of all of the cohort members, he’s probably the clearest on what his purpose in life is. And what he needs WLI is to figure out how to turn that into the nonprofit and the program.

So it's through a collaboration with Children's Institute LA County Department of Mental Health, we are doing this really wonderful work with the innovations initiative to work on trauma, informed communities, communities providing resources internally. And Shekalia and Adrian each stepped up to volunteer to be the representatives from their respective cohorts to serve on a wellness committee, to do some training so that they could be trainers in the community on trauma and resilience. And it was just, do this, do this move forward, here are good resources.

Well it doing that, and attending these meetings together, the two of them—who only ever had any connection because they both share WLI cohort member titles—developed this alliance that is unbreakable. I'm pretty sure they text one another 14 times an hour just to check in. Did you get this? And are you on that? How's the YouTube video that you're producing going because I have the next one lined up? They have launched an entire YouTube series on mental health and wellness in the time of COVID. We can send you the links. And it is very specific to the Watts community. It is responsive to the Watts community. It speaks to the Watts community.

One of the many things I love about their alliance is that they are this young Black-Brown partnership. And neither one of them identifies it as, "Well, I'm the Brown part of this membership or I'm the Black part of this membership or I'm the female part and I'm the male part." They are just that perfect combination of, "What does the community need? I've got this resource to contribute to that. I've got this resource to contribute to that. Hey guys, we don't have what we need to answer this. How do we find it? What can WLI help with? What can Children's Institute DMH..." They have seized this. They are the poster for WLI. Cohort 1 representing Cohort 2, male, female, Black, Brown. Just the response is remarkable.

Neither of their organizations were originally focused and articulating a focus on trauma and resilience, but it spoke so much to the core of them personally, as founders, as well as the programming that they were doing and envisioning, that it made sense. And now they've become the point people for each of their respective cohorts on this entire county wide initiative, that the Department of Mental Health is managing over this four year period. And they have changed the landscape of how that initiative is rolled out in Watts.

**Audio Clip #3:**

Jorja Leap: And it is overwhelming. And it is the reason WLI exists because these leaders deserve the support. It is about the funds for them, the computers for them, the training for them. This is all about supporting them because they don't stop. And they do. And this is not to be dramatic. They endanger their own lives. And by the way, COVID is just the most recent example. They endanger their own lives by gang intervention and gang prevention. They endanger their own lives when people are ill, not COVID, when people are chronically ill. They endanger their own lives by driving around in cars where the tires are bald. I can even give you the mundane examples. Karrah and I had a vision for what this was, but in the end, it's also our honor to serve these people.

Karrah Lompa: Every day.

Jorja Leap: We love them, but in addition to loving them, cause you can't not love people when you work, sort of shoulder to shoulder. We admire them and their efforts are to be admired. And not at a one day conference, but in a profound, ongoing way. They're heroic.

Karrah Lompa: There's no question why Jorja has spent more than four decades in Watts. I unfortunately started later in life, but I hope to achieve my four decades alongside Jorja in Watts.