

Wendy Slusser _Behind the Mic_ LiveWell Interview

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Kayleigh Ruller

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:00

What can I do to make a difference? And he said, When he finds something that's common sense, study it and publish it and policymakers role will run with it. You know, you can have good ideas or you can do good research, but if it doesn't impact people's lives, what's the point?

K Kayleigh Ruller 00:25

Hi, everyone, welcome back to the LiveWell podcast. My name is Kayleigh and I produce this podcast. I'm usually behind the scenes but today I will be interviewing a very special guest, Dr. Wendy Slusser. I'll be asking her about her career, her thoughts on mentorship, change-making and what it means to live well. It was a true honor to hear her stories. And it continues to be a great gift to work for an organization like several healthy campus initiative, that champions health and well being in its full capacity, social, physical, emotional, and beyond. Wendy embodies what Semel HCI promotes. She is the Associate Vice Provost for the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center . She's a clinical professor of pediatrics in the UCLA Schools of Medicine and Public Health, and the co founder of the UCLA fit for healthy weight program. She graduated from Princeton University completed her medical degree Master's in science in nutrition, and residency at Columbia University in New York, you will hear about all of her incredible and groundbreaking work in family medicine, health promotion, and research that inspired First Lady Michelle Obama's school lunch campaign. Wendy is a co leader for the UC healthy campus network, and much, much more. So I will let her do the talking. But thank you so much for tuning in. And I hope you enjoy. And please do let us know what you think by subscribing, sharing or reaching out to us online or on Instagram. Enjoy. Oh, it's gonna be so much fun. All right. Hi, Wendy.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:18

UCLA Healthy

Hello, Kayleigh.

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Kayleigh Ruller 02:19

Hi, I am so excited that I get the chance to interview you today for this special behind the mic series.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:28

Well, I can't imagine a better person to interview me.

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Kayleigh Ruller 02:32

You've done such an amazing job interviewing all of our incredible guests. I think that's something really spectacular about UCLA, is you're constantly surrounded by people who inspire you and challenge you. And I think that's, I think that's what this podcast is about, is about telling those stories of people that are inspiring, and you've built such a great network over your years at UCLA. So I guess that's a really great place to kind of start, start right here where we are on the podcast. And I know I came on board in fall of 2022. But this podcast has been live much before then. And I believe you started it back in 2019. So I'd love to know, what was the point of inspiration for you to start this podcast?

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 03:24

Well, you hit the you know, the nail on the head when you just said the the amazing people on our campus. The treasure hunt, really that I continue to have at UCLA where I'm meeting incredibly interesting and giving and committed individuals, whether they're staff, faculty or students. Really it started with Bob Bilder. When I was approached by Herbie Hancock who I had met because Herbie was the guest speaker, I got to talk to Herbie and explained to him what we were doing with the central healthy campus initiative center and so forth. And a couple of weeks later, I got a call from him, asking me if I knew of anybody on campus that could talk to him and the students who are part of the master's program in Jazz at UCLA, which is one of two masters programs in the country. Herbie is one of the faculty members. And he wanted somebody from the neuroscience department to give a talk on the connection of music and the brain. So I called Bob just to say, you know, do you know anybody who could give this kind of a talk? And he said, Well, I just gave a talk like that I can go and do it. And so I sat in the audience of six which included Herbie and the students and Bob gave this talk in their soundstage and it was just unbelievable, and it's not What he's known for, but it's just something he knows. That was the impetus of this podcast, I thought, wow, you know, we need to expose and, and telegraph people's talents that might not be ordinarily telegraphed from UCLA and share it with other people, because it's just such tremendous information, and it just can open the world to so many people.

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Kayleigh Ruller 05:24

Absolutelv. And I think what's so cool about the interviews too. is we hear about the work that

professors like Dr. Builder are doing, right, but we also hear about the person. And it's like those little bits of knowledge that you wouldn't normally hear in a traditional classroom setting. So I love that story. And listeners can go back to the first episode, right and listen to that, and they might hear that very presentation he gave for the class. So I want to rewind a little bit back to when you said you were talking to Herbie Hancock explaining what the Semel HCI center does. So I think that's my question for you. How can you explain what Semel HCI does for our listeners in sort of a quick elevator pitch way?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:10

Sure. Took me a while because it is pretty expansive. But it happened to be that when I was there with Herbie Jane Semel was with me as well. And she and her husband really envisioned and supported this initiative that then ultimately got endowed by them. And the goal was very simple. It was to make UCLA the healthiest campus to learn live, research, thrive and work for the over 85,000 students, staff and faculty and to inspire others, and really to do a well in our own backyard. And that hopefully would inspire at the others was launched over 10 years ago. And it was unusual at the time, in particular, because we were focusing not just on one population, not on staff or faculty or students, but on the whole. So it's a much more holistic approach to shifting a culture to one that is valuing the health and well being of all individuals and respecting people's dignity.

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Kayleigh Ruller 07:16

That is amazing. And I feel like the Semel healthy campus initiative center is spearheading a movement where we're talking about holistic well being in academic spaces. And I think that that feels very new. And it feels very, like UCLA has the means and the passion to have those conversations. And so I'm curious--so you're the Associate Vice Provost of Semel HCI, which is a very fancy name. And I'm curious what, what that looks like and entails in your day to day. And also, you know, what are some of those projects that you've done under under this role that you feel represent the mission of Semel HCI?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:04

Yeah, well, it is a fancy title, I didn't really know what it meant when I got asked to take on this position, which is over nine years ago. And so I actually looked up what Provost meant. And in Wikipedia, I read, I had to really look it up in preparation for this podcast, because I still don't completely remember what it means. I know what I do. But I don't know if it's reflective of what that word means. And so I'm an Associate Vice Provost, which means I'm in the cabinet of the Provost and the provost, themselves are seeing your academic administrators. The cool thing about the role that I have is, it's something that I was preparing my whole life to do, and I never knew it existed, this position that I took on, in 2014, I built all the skill set that I needed, and need to really execute on the job. And I'm, of course learning, I continue to learn as well.

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Kayleigh Ruller 09:09

And you said, you've been preparing your whole life for this in a way and you've sort of

alongside the help of others, you've forged this, this role in this organization that didn't exist. And so can you explain and dive a little deeper into how you have been preparing for this your whole life? You know, what led you here with with your specific expertise?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 09:34

It was a long, windy road, but you know, what you're describing what exists now, which is really a social movement and based on community organizing principles were that foundation was laid by my predecessor who was in this role for two years before me, Michael Goldstein and and he really established this work in a way that was unique because he was given the task by Chancellor block to lead this effort to have the goal that I described creating the healthiest campus in the country and inspire others. And there was no strategic plan, it was really a bottom up ground up initiative, engaging people from the community to define what we would do to create this and meet this grand vision. And so when I inherited the role, I had already been leading one of the focus areas which was eat well pod, the way that Michael Goldstein organized the effort initially was to identify faculty who are content experts in different subject areas. So I was in charge of the food piece. And then bodybuilder I mentioned was in charge of the mind well, which is emotional wellbeing piece. And then of course, there was move well, which is focused on physical health engaged by which promoted social well being breathed Well, which worked on removing tobacco from the campus, the built environment, focused area, which is called be well and finally, research while which helped track our progress to date. And so my my role for those first two years, the initiative was to lead the food, focus, eat well, pod, and it wasn't really it was a service physician for my overall work at UCLA was not my job part of my job. But it was emerged to be one of my favorite parts of my job, even though I loved every other part, which was teaching medical students and pediatric residents and researching in the community, mostly in LA Unified School District, and also working at the Venice family clinic. I also was the medical director for this pediatric obesity clinic that I had started. All those things I had been doing all my research and my education with the residents all focused on food, like teaching the students about nutrition so that they could be better physicians and, and parents themselves, teaching the medical students who might not go into a primary care track about nutrition, but at least they could learn the basics. My research, which was in the community, really promoting healthier eating options in the school lunch program, for instance. And I was part of a team, I was the PI and Sentinel study that showed that salad bars and schools made a difference in terms of, you know, the consumption of fruit and vegetables. And that help then First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move salad bars to school campaign. So like everything I did was very strategic in the sense, like, if I did research, I wanted to translate it into practice, somebody who gave me that great advice early on in my career at UCLA was said, you know, because I said, How can I make a difference in the world? That's really, you know, I can do research and just, you know, write papers and have them get dusty on the shelf, but what can I do to make a difference? And he said, when he find something, that's common sense, study it, and publish it, and policymakers role will run with it. So I, I've done that over time, and multiple times with this kind of work. And it continues in that direction, just because, you know, you can have good ideas, or you can do good research. But if it doesn't impact people's lives, what's the point?

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Kayleigh Ruller 13:43

Exactly. And as you're telling the story, it's, it's hard for me to imagine you, having only been a researcher, and being in a lab and writing papers, and not getting to be on the floor in the

world experiencing the impact of your collaborative work. You're such a popular face around campus, I feel like and you're a people person, and people want you to speak and host and this position is a really wonderful combination of your intelligence and your social skills. And so speaking of that, I know this role requires a lot of collaboration. And you said, you've worked alongside other Provost and I know you host the Semel HCI steering committee meetings where you're in a room surrounded by really intelligent and powerful and passionate people. So I'm curious who has been a mentor for you, and what have you learned from your community?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 14:42

There's been a lot of mentors in my life, but the ones that stand out from the period of me taking on this role, really consists of Professor Emeritus Michael Goldstein, who really taught me about skills needed to Community organize. There's no question Executive Vice Chancellor Provost, Scott Wah, who I met with every month for the first six years in my position, and it was very gratifying. And also I learned a lot from him like he always said, like one liners that would be very profound like health is something that you practice every day and going to the doctor's when you are sick. So that's, he was really validating the work we were doing, which was the work we do impacts people every day when they come on campus, or they have a touch point with the work that we do. And then I had a kitchen cabinet. I put together a kitchen cabinet because notoriously doctors are really bad lead leaders and managers. And I had known this forever. And I've done a fair amount of reading on it, especially early on when I finished my residency I was working with Save the Children for two years, and I had to teach others how to be good managers. I had never been taught the best way for me to learn usually is to have to teach somebody. So I did a lot of reading at that point. So I had, I had some knowledge, but I hadn't necessarily had much practice so and so now I would say Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Darnell Hunt is now he's been in in this position since the fall. And he's really providing great mentorship for me, giving me a lot of insight. It's important to have somebody who you can meet monthly to be able to share your questions, your ideas, you know where to go.

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Kayleigh Ruller 16:48

I agree. I think mentorship has been such a key component to maybe not just my or anyone's success, but a sense of confidence, and moving through imposter syndrome and doubt. And I know that I've even experienced mentorship from this Semel HCI team since I was a freshman when I joined Semel HCI. As an undergraduate student, that was always a huge value. It sounds like it starts from the top with you. And so I also thought your point about how you learn from teaching is really interesting, I totally relate to that. I feel like when I can lead a group, I actually take more from the group than maybe they're taking from me. And so I want to know how you are able to adjust and evolve goals on campus. Because there are changing circumstances. That's just the nature of being on a campus, you know, you've experienced that in the 10 years that you've been here, from COVID to unforeseen student faculty needs. So how do you lean on your community and lean on your expertise and adjust to change? And why is adjusting to change and changing times? Why is that important?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:11

Yeah, that's a big question. Backing up a little bit. I feel that one thing that prepared me for this position that probably allows me to be able to pivot, there are a couple of things. One is

disappointment with seeing efforts towards promoting health and well being get pushed to the backburner when budgets get tight. And so I was very cognizant that this was an initiative when I inherited it in the third year, and it wasn't endowed. And I wanted it to be sure to have longevity. And one of the ways to have longevity is to have a financial base. And so we were able thanks to the generosity of Terry and Jane Semel, who really felt the initiative was doing so well to be endowed. In our sixth year actually, of our efforts. One of the things that I used to teach was to look at people's strengths, identify assets, basically, people, programs policies, which initially when I was in charge of the food piece was food. So anyone that had anything to do with food, I was able to invite them all and we had regular meetings starting in 2011. We had monthly meetings and we got to know each other and ideas started formulating. I brought a whole bunch of research papers. That was one of my assets. I could bring science to the meeting. And Pete Angeles who's the head of housing, hospitality, read them and wanted to do a healthy vending project based on something that happened in Holland, but he didn't want to, you know, lose money and so we studied it with our assets from the garage It students and we, Pete and his team and nutritionists who are part of our eat well, pod. And together, we did a study that showed we can increase healthier items, you know, with lower cost for the healthier items and putting them at eye level, the healthier items, and we didn't hurt the bottom line. And so that study got published. This is an example of publishing something that's common sense. And then that study helped catalyze what we now have, which just got passed last year in 2022, healthy vending policy for all of the UCs, our our goal is to inspire others, and it didn't take long, then President Napolitano of the University of California, got wind of what we were doing mostly in food, because of the work that we were doing in our food pod. And within two years, she announced the global food initiative based on our work, if you're so gracious, and she really believed in what we were doing, not just for the Global Food Initiative, but she said, You know, I want to do what UCLA has done in regards to healthy campus niche, we want the whole we not just food, but everything emotional well being and physical well being. And I didn't forget that. And we pitched her group of us from one from Berkeley, and UCSF and Riverside and myself, we pitched to her chief of staff, a healthy campus network for all you sees based on our model at UCLA. And she agreed and she gave funding, and now there's a network that was kicked off in 2016, that set us up to really be able as a system public education system to respond as a group to major stresses.

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Kayleigh Ruller 21:52

Wow, wow, that is such a cool story. I didn't know that that's how the healthy campus network came to be. Starting from, like you said, making a common sense goal, doing some research and putting it into action with the vending machines, similar to the evolving priorities on campus, there seems to be a fluctuating definition of wellness in cultural conversations, and we call it well being. And so I'm curious why we use the phrase well being overwhelmingness. And I would love to know how you define well being in a campus setting at large?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:33

WHO, in 1948, described, health is not merely the absence of disease, but it's social, emotional, and physical well being. And that's really what we are focused on. And so if I think of it very simply, for me, it's where everyone feels they belong and can flourish. That's what I think of as a place that we would want to see at UCLA and, and in our broader communities.

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Kayleigh Ruller 23:12

I love that definition. And the word flourish. You're right. It's not just about, oh, it's a silly phrase, but it's true. We're not here to just survive, we want to thrive. And it's that same concept right, and elevating standards of health. And it seems that work can be seen and felt across campus from the Semel HCI gardens at sunset Rec. The new installation of Louie Schwartzberg moving art that will be on TVs across campus, the UCLA rec teaching kitchen, all of that has come to be because of motivation from Semel HCI. So you can really feel the effects of well being existing throughout campus. So, you know, I'm curious also, I find myself in periods of stagnancy, sometimes with big projects and a lot of work. And I imagine you have a lot of work on your plate. And I would like to know how and in a position such as yours, how you move through periods of stagnation, and continue to find inspiration.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:19

Yeah, I know what you're saying. And it's, I think, a normal kind of evolution and development that occurs in on and thinking of child development. I think of it as a helix going upwards, and there's every six months, you're in equilibrium, and then every other six months, you're in dis equilibrium. And so when you're in equilibrium, things are going well you don't really notice that you're have any eggs and you know, things are going fine. And then you get into this other side which is disequilibrium, and it's feels like things are a little bit off and maybe you're not even getting somewhere or you could be bored, whatever it might be. It's growing pains. I think part of it. Now, being bored is not growing pains. I think that's something where you need to be identifying ways to challenge yourself. And, you know, I remember there was a great article about a toll booth operator, who was just so engaged in his work, and he knew everyone's name. And so he he had this sort of relationship with people. And so there is something about that, you know, doesn't necessarily have to be reflective of your job. It's more about, you know, being engaged in your job and getting enjoyment out of it in ways that you might not see, I had prepared for this question. And I thought about what might be helpful is this quote from Gandhi, which I've read a number of times over the course of my life, which is First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.

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Kayleigh Ruller 26:08

Wow, thank you for sharing that quote. And you mentioned, you're wearing your paediatric hat. I was wondering if you could speak a little briefly on that. Because before you were here, you were a practicing physician. Correct. And so that's your background. So I'd love to hear just a little bit about that part of your life. And I know you wanted to do research, but I'm not sure the path you took. So what happened? You know, after you graduated school?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 26:41

So I knew that I needed to have a varied path. And it would be each of my paths could contribute to each other. So I mean, right out of my residency, you know, after medical school, you do residency, so I still did three years of pediatric residency all in New York City at Columbia. Two years after my residency, working for Save the Children Federation, I was based in the States, but I was in charge of evaluation of, of child health programs that were at the

Agency for International Development, funded school aid, mostly in Africa, mostly in Zimbabwe, Malawi, but I did work in Nepal, and Bangladesh, and Bolivia, and Indonesia. And that work was really formative in a lot of ways. It taught me about cultural openness, working in not just countries that were emerging kind of emerging economies, but I wouldn't be in the parts of the country that were more the more impoverished parts. And so it taught me how to be resourceful and, and, and work with very little materials to promote health and well being and I was doing maternal and child health promotion and with village health workers, and my largest period of time where I spent time providing care, in a clinical sense was at the Venice family clinic for almost 20 years and half my time of being at Venice family clinic I developed and I pulled together that primary care educational program for a third of the pediatric residents. And so I was in charge of that. So I was doing a mixture of my own clinic, you know, I taught all the pediatric residents to asset mapping and mobilization. In other words, not just to give, you know, talk to children about nutrition, but learn about where they live. So they would go out to the communities where they lived, and identify all the parks and all the swimming pools and all the libraries and anything that would enrich the child's life so that when they counseled those families, they would be able to say ideas to families, in ways that were more concrete than just saying go find a park teaching the next generation of pediatricians in fact, all the pediatricians that are there now they're like four or five of them, I trained I trained them all. In primary care. They they're all from our UCLA pediatric residency program. That must be so rewarding. It is it's also feels really good because I know they're good at things like nutrition, right? Like a lot of other doctors, unfortunately, are not but I feel very confident that they're really good at all those things. So what I felt was like my clinical work, informed my research questions and my research informed my practice with the state of the art kinds of practices. So that was really useful. I was doing all of that and then that's when the I started leading the food pot and brought that skill set to you. The seller healthy Campus Initiative center, we actually educated all the other campuses about that methodology and how to engage people through asset mapping and mobilization. And then a collective impact model, where everyone like comes to the meeting leaves their personal agenda at the door, agrees on a common goal, and you meet regularly. And it's a form of social movement, organizing that kind of methodology. And it's very effective. If you do it, right. There's pitfalls if you don't, but

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Kayleigh Ruller 30:34

Yeah, yeah, that's very fascinating. And I, I honestly haven't heard of that approach. I mean, I think maybe indirectly, I have, and I only have my my undergraduate degree, but I studied human biology and society. And I think we've, we pointed out a lot of that nuance, but it's really cool to see how you talk people, doctors to understand the nuances of environmental health, right, at a small scale directly when working with patients. And now, you're translating that to a large scale environment of UCLA, and now, the UC wide campuses, which is really incredible. And I also like what you said about, I think you opened the question with, you always knew you wanted a varied path. And you did have that. But it sounds also like you have themes of health, food, education, impact, that guide all of those different roles that you've had. So to finish up, I have three quick little questions. The first one is, what are three things that you're extremely proud of?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 31:40

I like but are Arthur Ashe tennis champion and activist Said's start where you are, use what you have, do what you can, that's kind of attitude I have I do my best. And so I'm proud of that. I'm

proud of, of course, I'm proud of my family. I'm proud of the fact that there are so many people, like you, Kayleigh that are so interested in this subject and believe in it. And I feel like there's a growing alumni populating other ecosystems to bring this idea forth, you know, the asset mapping and mobilization is the opposite of his needs assessment. And it just drives me nuts. Because that's like a deficit model. What do you need rather than? What are your strengths that we can build on? Right? Probably one of the biggest milestones in our unhealthy campus Nishant besides of course, getting in town, which was really helpful. Well, one there the Food Summit and 2014 that basically, we had over 60 leaders come together, and we dreamed up, we said, let's just dream. What could we do on the UCLA campus, around food. And we made five goals, major goals, undergraduate students, Food Studies, minor Food Studies Certificate Program, a garden, a teaching kitchen in the pie in the sky was the Food Studies, a Food Studies Institute, and All five have been achieved the Food Studies Institute. Now the Rothman Family Institute for Food Studies launched in 2022. So that's a huge accomplishment. The other accomplishment which gets to the previous question you asked, Is that a cut when COVID hit, I wanted to make sure that many of the memos that were emanating from all the administration were really focused, which they should have been on logistics, no one knew what was going on. Here, we were able to get out what we call Bruin posts, which is a use UCLA wide, posting in the email for everybody to receive all of 85,000 students, staff and faculty. And we made sure there was a post around focusing on people's social, emotional, physical well being we were asked to lead one of the working groups that focused on the COVID response and recovery for the well being and work expectations at the staff. Since then, post graduate strike we have been asked to lead the Campus Climate Committee because of our track record and our ability to bring people together of all different walks of life on campus. And I think that has led us to focus right now on our restorative practice kind of work that we're doing. And we are the we really are they connected tissue for the campus across all the different disciplines. We're The silo breaker. And we're really still, from the, you know, the foundation up, the ground up is what we who we represent.

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Kayleigh Ruller 35:11

I truly believe that and can see that, you know, every day on campus, so much to be proud of. So what are three areas that you'd like to grow. And if you don't have three, that's okay, maybe you want,

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 35:24

you know, where I'd like to grow is to be able to build our subject areas out in a way that can be a sustainable model. And that will take a mixture of engagement at all levels, the restorative practice, I think, is some area that we really could grow in that, really, at the community level, can really create a sense of belonging and acceptance

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Kayleigh Ruller 36:00

Of others. Absolutely. And I know, you recently hosted a restorative practice workshop.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 36:09

You helped us.

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Kayleigh Ruller 36:14

Logistics, but I got to learn important parts of it. And I did get to learn and I look forward to seeing how you'll be inviting people moving forward for continuing workshops, and really making restorative practice a standard in UCLA culture. And our final question that you ask all of our guests that I'd like to ask you is, what does it mean for you to live well?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 36:43

I've thought a lot about this. I would like to say that, for me, being able to feel that I've been able to contribute to the better good of others, at least once every day, I'd like to do more. But if I did it just once a day, or at least, worked on it, that would be important to me, that would make me feel like I was living well.

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Kayleigh Ruller 37:14

Wow. That was, like you said, so many of your mentors have given really succinct responses that are full of wisdom. And I think that is the one you just gave me and our listeners, it's really so humble of you to just want to do good for someone. So one small thing each day, because I think at this point in your career, and in your life, you have accomplished that. But the fact that you want to continue forward and stay strong in that mission. And that will continue to lead you and your community to really wonderful and, and growth oriented places. So I am so grateful that I got to interview you today and learn more about the work that you've done and how you got here and to hear what you're so proud of. And I hope that our listeners really enjoyed this episode. It's fun to have a little role reversal here. So thank you so much, Wendy, for hosting this podcast normally and for the work you do at Semel HCI.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 38:21

Well, Kaylee, I am so happy to work with you so closely and this podcast is just taking off your superpower. Showing up in this one for sure. And thank you. Thank you for that.

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Kayleigh Ruller 38:44

Wendy is deeply committed to bringing health equity and justice through collaboration and education to UCLA. She translated her research and medical training into education, and really making systemic change at the university level. I'm really grateful to get the opportunity to chat with her and to host this special episode. We really appreciate you tuning in. We would love for you to do more than just tune in and gift us with your feedback or your suggestions. DM us at healthy UCLA on Instagram, or visit our website healthy.ucla.edu And send us a message on the podcast page. Until next time, everyone. Thanks so much. This episode has been brought to you by the Seminole healthy campus initiative Center at UCLA.

