

Olivia Farr LiveWell Interview Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Olivia Farr, Dr. Wendy Slusser



Olivia Farr 00:00

You really have to meet people where they are. That was a lesson I came to appreciate later. It's you know, just trying to find that spark in your, you know, your community of like minded people know finding out which areas they're going to feel proud that they made an impact in.



Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:22

Hi, everyone, welcome back to LiveWell. If you're even the slightest bit curious about building a social movement, or community building look no further. Today on live well, Olivia Farr, who is an innovator and an environmental change maker, shares how she ignited a social movement in her own backyard that started with her beating people where they are and creating a win win win for all that is translated across the state of New York and beyond. Let's hear the full story from Olivia enjoy. Olivia has spent her career launching and supporting a broad range of nonprofits. Most recently, she's co founded the Bedford 2030 Coalition, a Climate Action Plan program in Bedford, New York. And this is what we will be talking about for most of this podcast with an undergrad degree from UPenn, a master's in business from Pace University, and a Master's in Public Administration from New York University and decades of advising and leading health equity promoting programs like healthy babies, bright futures, and the John Merck fund. Olivia is a true force for good and a believer in the power of movement building. Today we'll hear from Olivia about the what how and why she's building a seemingly unstoppable movement called the Bedford 2030 initiative. So thank you, Olivia, for joining us to share your invaluable wisdoms.



Olivia Farr 01:52

Thank you for having me when they I'm delighted that all sounds so amazing. I can hardly believe I did that all those things, but thank you.




Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:02

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:02

Nice sometimes to hear it and reflect right? Well, well earned and well deserved. To set the stage. Let's just think about the town of Bedford, which actually is a series of Hamlet's as I understand, right? What does that mean, first of all, series of Hamlet's?

 Olivia Farr 02:19


Hamlet's are small communities, each sort of governed by the town, which has its own administration. Each Hamlet has its own elementary school, and then they gather under the town of Bedford Central School District. But the town of Bedford essentially sets the policy for all of them the far reaching policies.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:39

That's, that's very helpful. So the town of Bedford was the first community to develop a Climate Action Plan in Westchester. Let's start there, what were you seeing in your community that propelled you to start this program?

 Olivia Farr 02:55

I think a lot of us who cared about environmental issues, saw that there wasn't a lot of local action, we felt very disengaged from the talk that was going on. And the words that were used were global warming. And they were these huge terms that people got, you know, are starting to feel apprehensive. We certainly knew there was a problem if you read up on it. But there were no directives that went down to a community level to make people feel that they could actually make change on the topic. We also came into being on the heels of Obama's campaign where his mantra was, yes, we can. And we said, well, we need to employ that locally. Yes, we can. So what we did was kind of create a retail trade show, if you will, for people interested in making progress on global warming. We were saying at the time, we later learned through tons of messaging research done by lots of national groups that climate change was more, you know, resonated more clearly with people. But back then if you mentioned global warming, people's eyes would glaze over. Well, what does what does that actually mean? So we started with the trade show, Expo and information session at the high school, and we were kind of blown away because we had to shut it down after 1000 People came through the door. And we segmented it into large lectures where national educators and scientists came and talked about the big issues of the day, what's happening to our oceans? How are we using farmland what's what's happening in our recycling efforts, and then drill down to the workshops where local people who had some authority could give our residents and attendees basically a laundry list of things they could actually do. in their backyard or in their houses to make them feel like you have the power to make change on this issue. And if we could edit it, educate people that they understood what the problem is, but give them tools, we had the beginning of engagement.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 05:16

Wow, what a great roadmap for others to think about if they have a passion or concern in their own community. I remember you receiving speaking of Obama, one of his challenge grants from the Department of Energy in 2000. And it was part of this effort or the was at the

from the Department of Energy in 2009. And it was part of this effort or it was at the beginning of your effort?

O Olivia Farr 05:41

We applied for that grant, after our environmental summit, it wasn't really a trade show, formal name was environmental summit. So we applied for it after that. And it was matched by NYSERDA, which is the New York State Energy and Recovery. So we got an effect got a double grant for a pilot study, what we learned from our summit was the most impact you can have is if you start to retrofit your homes, to make them more energy efficient, that has profound effect on your greenhouse gas emissions. So we started there, and we were a pilot project that went out to prove, if you can do energy efficiency of your residential housing stock, you will make some great strides toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. And we took on 300 houses as part of the pilot over a three year period. And that involved all sorts of campaigns in terms of public awareness and hiring people to go to people's homes working with contractors. And we did it and that program rolled out statewide after that.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:52

Wow, that's like a prototype of what those challenge grants in 2009 were intended to do.

O Olivia Farr 06:58

Yeah, well, it was it was really hard, intensive work and a lot of education. But you know, once people understood that they were actually wasting money by not upgrading either their furnaces or putting in better insulation in their walls. The light bulbs really went off, and then you had neighbors talking to neighbors.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 07:23

Yeah. So when, when to when people, it motivates them because they save money. And then of course, it's a win for mother nature. Exactly. It shows the power of local organizing. And I'd like to get back to this, you know, where you had 1000 people show up at the high school, you you refer to it as the place where you learned this first step that you then took on in terms of getting it funded, is what were all the different ideas that came from that particular first organizing event.

O Olivia Farr 07:58

I believe we had someone from the federal level, they certainly had someone from the state level. So a lot of what we've done, we've also been very careful to include government officials. Our local town was very proactive and a partner of ours from the very beginning. So we were careful to both have contractors who could speak to well, what happens when we come in to

upgrade your home? What does that look like? And policy makers, I guess I would say that they were also there from neighboring towns. So they saw what we were doing. And they went back to their own towns and said, Look, you know, we have to we can do this too.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:41

And that was a big recession period of recession of 2009. And those challenge grants were not only addressing issues that were high on the agenda for the Obama administration, like global warming, but also we're meant to employ people. You not only had a win for the environment, but you also had a win for the individuals saving money, but you also created jobs. And that's a really important, I think trifecta for all of us to be aware of.

O Olivia Farr 09:13

It comes down to resources. And not every community like ours has all the pieces in place. We're a well resourced town in Northern Westchester. But most important, as I mentioned before, our local government was right was our partner. They wanted to make change. We still like to think we have a bigger impact because we know some of our programs get exported. We just passed a local it's called the new building health and performance loss. That's 30% of our building stock our apartments with a lot of low income people usually and you They have inspections periodically as a normal course of business, or what we've done is we've added a certain criteria that have to deal with energy efficiency and health to that checklists that weren't there before. And this is also a way of us trying to include more low income people in our sort of menu of services, who ordinarily, they're not going to be able to go, you know, put new insulation in the walls, because they're beholden to the landlord. However, this will directly impact them, because their fuel bills will go down. If it's flagged that oh, this, this building is right for more insulation. And if the landlord can't afford it, we're working in partnership with New York State to find them resources to do that. And it could have far reaching impacts across the state.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 10:48

And then maybe across the country, I mean, what you're describing, really what I call an inclusive culture of health, these policy changes can be translated to a much broader community ones that are often forgotten.

O Olivia Farr 11:02

Exactly.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 11:04

Well, so you say that these policymakers in your town were engaged from the get go? Was it? Was it that they were voted in with this kind of philosophy? Or do you How did you win them over for those that weren't necessarily?

O Olivia Farr 11:19

Well, with the original one, she actually came to us. She cared about her legacy, she cared about her grandchildren, and and wanted to do something that would impact their lives. It's just led to a recognition and, frankly, community pride that our town is so involved. I mean, I think everyone in the community is very proud that we've made as much headway as we have. And we're of New York State municipalities were one of 10 climate smart communities to achieve silver status.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 11:54

And what is that silver status?

O Olivia Farr 11:57

There's a rubric that you follow, you know, how to how you measure your carbon emissions, and there's a formal process to it. And we've made some significant strides.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:09

So, it's all based on carbon emissions?

O Olivia Farr 12:10

Yeah. And and other things, you know, like, what's your recycling rate? We just found out our town is recycling 76% of its waste. Now, that doesn't mean that all that gets recycled at the municipal recovery facility. But we are up to that rate, which means an incredible reduction in what we actually throw out now.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:34

Wow, that's really the sign of true engagement, that's for sure. Over the 50% mark is pretty tremendous measurement is key, you know, bringing back the conversation to that first policymaker that you referred to being concerned about her grandchildren. A phrase I heard recently from Dr. Alonzo Plough from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. A question he asked a group of us is what kind of ancestor Do you want to be? Oh, I love that. I think you and I are getting to that stage, too.

O Olivia Farr 13:10

Well, it's also I've just reading this fabulous book by a 30 year old from Oxford and UK. And it's called not the end of the world. And her name is Hannah Ritchie. And she says that we've got it all wrong. Stop this alarm and doom. Yes, we're probably not where we should be. But he

all wrong. Stop this gloom and doom. Yes, we're probably not where we should be. But be positive about it, be joyful about the victories you've made. Because if you don't make the action and the engagement, positive and alluring, people can turn off so easily. Why should I try? Why should I do this? And I just I was so blown away by what how she had framed it. And she's absolutely right.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 13:54

You're really pointing to something. That is why your example is such a great one as inspiration is that I think there's a lot of climate anxiety among youth. And it's related to that sense, like there's nothing you can do about it, but what you're designing for your community is yes, there is. It really gets to this question about the power of activating a community like what you did with the Bedford 2030. I think that we all should be thinking about how we could apply it to our own community. tips would you offer people who might not have the capacity to, you know, get a big grant or whatever, but they can build their community around certain themes.

O Olivia Farr 14:40

Yeah, if someone wants to, in effect, build the army. You really have to meet people where they are. That was a lesson I came to appreciate later. I heard it didn't quite believe it. I thought everyone would think like I did know not true. Either. They haven't had The necessary education in the topic and what was going on, or they simply weren't interested. So you really have to make them where they are. And for some it might be, well, I don't have an a lot of time, I can't do too much. I can't afford, you know, the most impactful actions, but I can compost, I can actually do that. And then once you get them hooked on an action that they feel good about, and they have the resources to make it happen. You usually it's sort of like Hansel and Gretel, you can feed breadcrumbs to lead to the next act, you know, sort of column of activities where they can take another action, but it's being patient. It's education. And it's empowerment through toolkits, resources, or people to actually go help them like one of the more successful messengers for our energy efficiency programs were women, because once you've got them to look in their furnace room, and not be afraid of it, like looking under the hood of a car, and understood how it worked. And they felt that power and knowledge that they could communicate to their neighbor, and then how much money they saved and what actually went on. They were your best storytellers, and enthusiastic champions, it's, you know, just trying to find that spark in your, you know, your community of like minded people know, finding out which areas, they're going to feel proud that they made an impact.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 16:40

I really like that recipe, really removing the mystery about something like the furnace, yeah, suddenly, it becomes less scary, or it also becomes something that you can actually maintain and make a difference with. Yeah, the other example you gave, which is the compost example. I just remember when we just when we started composting, maybe two decades ago, was my marveled at how little garbage I had. Yeah. That was great. I didn't have to take out the garbage every day or every other day was once a week that I actually took the garbage out between the composting and the paper items, or the recycling that between the two of them. That was really demonstrated how much waste came from my everyday life.

O Olivia Farr 17:38

Exactly. For those people who can't do it in their yards. By you know, if it's prohibited in a certain district of town. If enough people are doing it and enjoy it, you know, again, it builds up the enthusiasm within the community. And the next step being you have a municipal compost pickup. And we do have a service. It's not quite townwide yet, but it was all on the backs of people who really enjoyed doing it. So enough people start doing it to support that kind of policy.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:12

What's cool about what you've done, and you're talking about these individual actions that can help engage somebody to participate in a bigger way, potentially over time, is that you've actually developed guides, right household guides on a household or individual level change. And I'd love to know, what are you the most proud of in that guide? Well,

O Olivia Farr 18:36

I had nothing to do with this. But again, an amazing inspirational community member launched something called the recycler PDF. So if you have any question about what things in your household, what you can do with them, and it's A to Z, you just go there, and it's now statewide, it's on the state site, which I think is really cool. And it's such a

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:01

resource. That is fantastic. You're gonna have to give us that website so that well, all the listeners, because I think it's really phenomenal. So in your experience, which one of the sectors have you found to be the easiest or most efficient to change in your guide or in the work that you've done? Related to I guess, electric supply, high performance buildings, transportation, waste, sustainable food practices, water and land? There's so many pieces to it, right?

O Olivia Farr 19:33

I think they're all challenging in their own way. So for example, energy was probably a very slow start, but we had more resources to put to the communications involved with energy. And then it definitely is the sector with the most impact on greenhouse gas emissions. Food is probably number one in terms of engagement. I was chair of Food forum for the community and we had over 900 people come. And we had chefs demonstrating how to cook with with just vegetables for vegetarians, people eating less meat, we also launched an institutional food initiative of area hospitals, so that they could buy more locally. But in terms of tracking the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, it's really hard. I mean, we did a community wide Meatless Monday campaign from that. And anecdotally, we can say, Okay, we save this amount, because x households aren't eating meat on Mondays, but it's, you know, it's just not

as exact as we'd like. And it's, we haven't continued to monitor that. So it just varies by sector. And again, it goes back to meet people where they are and then, you know, if they're engaged by food, well, maybe then they start thinking about if they can recycle more.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 20:59

Yeah, I can understand that if you don't have a regular measurement tool, and it comes down to individual measurement. It's a difficult institution, I suppose you could do it probably the hospitals or something

O Olivia Farr 21:11

like, yeah, they were that was great when they were all recording, but then the project and another program, we've launched this healthy yard initiative, there, we can be pretty exact, where we're getting homeowners to do an inventory of their yards, what kinds of trees, how many. And this is sort of a land use tool. With those trees, let's say they die, or they somebody wants to take them down, we have an pretty exact count of how much carbon is then, you know, either released or saved in the soil, depending on the

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 21:48

activity. Because the plants are the grass, when it grows, captures the carbon is that yeah,

O Olivia Farr 21:55

it stores carbon. And also, you know, just the most landscaping companies that people rely on, haven't made the transition to electric motors. We're trying to help with that. But you know, those small motors are some of the worst offenders in terms of carbon monoxide, the permaculture of grass lawns, most people put fertilizer on it that's not especially healthy. And they're wonderful ways of creating habitat for butterflies and other species by not mowing, yes, you have to kind of watch it, but it's a win win.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:30

One thing you've said before is that ideas that don't work are just as important as those that do work. Can you reflect on that and explain what you mean by that?

O Olivia Farr 22:41

Well, in some cases, there are populations we really hadn't considered. So we went whole hog into trying to get rid of plastic bags in the markets. And certainly the trend line was there to replace them. But there are a lot of people who depend on them and can afford to buy a reusable bag, we got lucky because the state swept in maybe two years later, and changed the law. We just thought, oh, everyone's going to jump on our bandwagon and see why this is so

important. But that did not happen. You know, it was a good learning curve for us test the market. First, understand who all your populations are and what their motivations are, before you go in, you know, thinking that everyone's going to share your vision that reminds

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 23:32

me of an LA Unified School District. During the Obama time when that lunch school programs shifted to a healthier kind of array of foods. But there was no run up for the families. And so there was a lot of pushback. I think that is a great lesson you just can't change suddenly. So aside from the carbon neutrality being the end goal, what else do you hope to come out of this initiative that you're working towards?

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Olivia Farr 23:58

I hope that people go about their day thinking positively about making change in in everyday steps. Because each particularly consumer movement sends a message into the supply chain. And and that message is literally like you're, you know, voting for environmental change or not, you

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:27

know, you you have a lot to be proud of. And I'm I certainly in so proud of the work you've done over these decades. And as you're reflecting on your career, what would you tell your younger self,

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Olivia Farr 24:40

I would tell my younger self, that you're not going to figure out what you're going to do right away. It's a series of building blocks. It's based on your values, your education, where he came from your parents, and that The real to me the real joy in life is finding like minded community members and and making a positive change for others. I know, the actions I have taken with my friends and my colleagues will make a better world for my grandchildren. Are they the answer? No. But at least we try. And I think that's just, it's a wonderful feeling so gratifying. So if I were starting out, I would encourage everyone to get involved in the community, because the joy, the meaning that you you get from those experiences of collaboration and movement building are unlike anything I've experienced.


D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:49

Also providing a example to your children and grandchildren by doing what you're doing. So it's not only that you're giving them the gift of hopefully a better world in terms of our living environment. But also the the example, as we know, kids are much more likely to follow your example, not what you say. Right? Right. You know, you have done the same. You mentioned to me a while back that a lot of the skills were because you watched your father in community organizing, tell me how that impacted you.

 Olivia Farr 26:28


My dad was a politician, he used to sell life insurance. And then there they were trying to pave the road we were on, I think that was the issue or there are potholes or something. Anyway, next step, he finds himself, he's an alderman and Massachusetts. And from there, realize he had a gift with people and he cared about public issues. So that became his job full time. And then he he ran the minority party in Massachusetts for many years and got involved very involved in sort of at the beginning of the energy crisis in the early 70s. And so I learned directly from him be at him running down the hallway telling me to turn off the shower, because I've been in there too long. And, you know, he really reoriented my thinking. And it was also a lot of campaigning where we were out, meeting people at state fairs, parades, and I saw his joy in just getting to know all different kinds of people. And understanding that we all share something and when there's there is a problem that needs to be addressed. All those different people coming together is one of the most powerful things to witness.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:43

It's really a great story about community organizing, and being by the side of a of a great person, like your dad, and now look at you.

 27:54


Oh, thanks Wendy.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:56

Really. Based on your experience, what advice would you give someone who would like to take steps like what you've done in building the Bedford 2030 coalition?

 28:08

I would suggest you get educated. And again, to use an example, if it's composting or food waste in general, find out what your municipality is doing on the issue. If you see a gap in where you think more can be done. Start talking to people about it, you will find other like minded people have noticed the same thing. That's important and you can go talk to your government, they work for you. So make an appointment, find out what's what's going on. And in a lot of cases, they'll say, Hey, can you help me on this? Can you go out and organize for us, and then we'll help you.

 Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:51

I really like that piece of advice. It's really a form of, you know, identifying need, but also identifying the assets in your community, whether they're the like minded people or the policymakers were the shonkeepers whoever it might be and bringing them together with that

policyholders were the shopkeepers, whoever it might be, and bringing them together with that common goal. So it's, it's it's doable, and I think this climate anxiety can be turned into climate action, right, that sort of yes, we can. And be inclusive. Again, Dr. Alonzo Plough mentioned how climate change is a real multiplier in terms of increasing disparities, different communities that are more need are at a higher risk because of our climate changes.

O Olivia Farr 29:39
Absolutely.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:40
What we always like to do before we finish our interviews is to ask our guests what does it mean for you to live well?

O Olivia Farr 29:49
For me to live well is to live with intention, and to know that I've helped someone so somewhere. Hmm, that that, to me is a full rich life and to have fun. Oh, yes, that's important. And laugh and laugh. Exactly.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:13
This has been such a treat to interview you on this subject. I knew I've known you for decades. But this interview really gave me insight and more detail about what you've been doing in Bedford. And I know there are other parts of your activism and community organizing that we'll have to talk about in the next podcast. Stay tuned.

O Olivia Farr 30:36
Thank you, Wendy. It's been a sheer pleasure. And thank you for having the podcast. It just shows you another example of how Wendy Slusser is one of the most inspiring individuals on the planet.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 30:48
Oh, my goodness. Thank you. What an honor it is to host Olivia on live well, I'm so motivated by her spirit and humility. And most of all, her conviction that social change can happen when you listen to your neighbors. meet them where they are, and believe. Yes, you can. We will talk to you soon. Have a great day.