

THE STORY GOES | BRENDA MASCORRO | SARAH

MOLLY: Well, hello, it's me, Molly, and I'm here with Kiran.

KIRAN: Hi!

MOLLY: (laughs) Is that how we are starting today?

KIRAN: Yep!

MOLLY: Oh man. We are coming to you *live* at the closet in KLRN. You're listening to The Story Goes, which is a podcast that is in partnership with SA2020, a nonprofit organization that drives progress toward a shared vision for a thriving San Antonio, and KLRN, your local public television station. And no, we are not on your television. We are in your ears. We are like in your ear pods. We have all the good ways of telling the more complete story of San Antonio, and we try to bring people in who are working in organizations that are helping us be an even better city. We've got that person here today. You cannot ruin it, Brenda! You are that person who is making our city better today. Brenda Mascorro, I did it.

BRENDA: Mascorro.

MOLLY: There it is, who is the CEO/ Executive Director of SARAH, so South Alamo Regional Alliance for the Homeless.

BRENDA: We are going to rebrand soon just so you know. [\(1:09\)](#) (laughs)

MOLLY: Y'all are doing some amazing work. You're also sort of a hidden gem in our city, I think.

BRENDA: Well, thank you. First of all, thank you for having me. This is really awesome. I was really looking forward to the closet. It's exactly that. (laughs) It's awesome. Yeah, you know, we haven't been around very long, so maybe that's one of the reasons we are kind of hidden. A lot of folks have misconceptions just based on our name, but at the same time, we do help the homeless, just in a different way. We don't provide direct services to the homeless, and everybody when I say that, people automatically are like, "what does that mean?" We don't have individuals that provide direct services. We have data analysts. We have researchers. We have planners. We have folks that write very well, and we have folks that are really looking at best practices across the nation to how we can better serve our homeless population here in San Antonio and Bexar County. [\(2:11\)](#)

MOLLY: We've seen some major progress in veteran homelessness, but we've also seen not great work in homelessness because it's such a complex issue. We were talking on the way over here on the idea that homelessness is generally is something that people can't wrap their



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brains around. Y'all are the people in charge of the Point in Time count, so how do we help homeless whether it's moving up or down, whether it's in shelters or out of homes, you are the people who sort of coordinate the one day a year that you send hundreds of volunteers out in our community to count the amount of homelessness people we have in our community, correct? [\(2:55\)](#)

BRENDA: That's correct, and the way we do our Point in Time Count, it's one time a year, and we are not unique to this. The entire nation does this.

MOLLY: Same day?

BRENDA: Same day for the most part. Texas has the same day. As long as it's in January. We, last year, we had 400 volunteers. We have a great partnership with SAPD. We also were able to purchase with the help of USAA, this year and last year, an app to be able to really get information on the individuals we are surveying. We also have volunteers put together packets, goodie packets, for the homeless individuals that participate in answering our questions and allow us to count them and talk a little bit about what their needs are and why they are where they are and who they are, most importantly, who they are. It's a big effort. Last year was the first year we had Street Medicine San Antonio, which is a group from University of Incarnate Word's Osteopathic Medicine group, and it's a couple medical doctors and students that helped us with just, they went out to help to see if there is any additional needs out there when we went. This year, always adding one more component to make it a better count and also to involve the community. I think it's important for the community to do this. It's important for the community to meet neighbors that most often are not comfortable having conversations with. [\(4:34\)](#)

MOLLY: The thing that you said that stood out the most to me in that was "most importantly, who they are." Meet your neighbors. It's so important, I think, to understand that in such a smart way. People that are homeless are people.

KIRAN: Right. I would imagine with 400 volunteers coming out for the Point in Time Count, that would be such an opportunity to realize I didn't even know I held this stereotype or bias of homeless people until I'm out in the community and volunteering in this way, and being intentional to see. I know sometimes we, there's a conversation around homeless people are invisible in our community, in which we either see or don't see them. Tell us more about both the stereotype and the narrative that SARAH works to fix with people that are homeless. [\(5:23\)](#)

BRENDA: That's I think my favorite part of my job. The first time I volunteered for the Point in Time Count, I didn't know what the Point in Time Count was. I was a board member at SARAH at the time. I volunteered, and I came out enlightened. I was energized. You know, it's just, you pass by homeless individuals, and often times I remember being sentimental and thinking that could be anyone. A lot of us can relate because I think any one of us could end up being



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homeless because individuals that are homeless don't just wake up one morning and are like, "Okay, I want to be homeless today." It's usually a traumatic event that leads to another traumatic event that leads to another, and before you know it, it's difficult to catch up. There's really no stereotypical homeless person. I think, I've met so many individuals. We have an amazing board member currently who was homeless almost her entire childhood here in San Antonio, lived in all the different shelters, and now is a business owner. She has her own nonprofit. She's just *amazing*. Unless you have a conversation, she won't ever mention about her experience. I find that often. There were individuals that were once homeless, when they were children or at some point in their life, it's not something that's the first topic of conversation. You just really don't know what people have experienced that lead them to becoming homeless. It's sad because a lot of folks are just automatically afraid. [\(7:09\)](#)

KIRAN: I have so many questions to follow up for that. I don't take for granted how *hard* your job is every day. I would imagine, of course, being responsible every day for a multi-million-dollar budget and coordinating those funds across multiple sectors and organizations to reduce homelessness in San Antonio is not rewarding every single day, I would guess. Why did you say yes to this opportunity? [\(7:35\)](#)

BRENDA: There's a couple different reasons. So, before this I worked in affordable housing, and before that, I worked in the university and did policy and affordable housing at the University. Before that, as a child, I lived in affordable housing. So, before that, my mother passed away when I was young. So, there was a time there where we just, we lived in public housing, but without a head of household. We obviously had to just leave, and some of the older kids took younger kids. We suffered some really difficult times. I remember in high school, and not even necessarily realizing I didn't have a house. I just lived and stayed with my friends, and I was a straight A student. I was captain of the basketball team. I was majoring at the time in broadcast journalism at a magnet school, and this and that. Nobody really knew, and this happens often, where people don't really know what people are going through. So, I in particular am very passionate in ending youth homelessness because when it comes to youth, they really don't have a choice in the matter a lot of the time. They, you know, in my case, my mom had cancer, and she passed away at a young age. So, in my case, there was no say in my part. She was a single mother of eight, and those were just the circumstances. I feel that if we just really start focusing on youth homelessness and end the cycle before it begins, we won't have to deal with the more difficult type. The chronic homelessness. The homeless that is difficult for us to treat. It's difficult for us to reach out to. In particular, I am very passionate about the youth. I think about as a community we can all have an obligation, a responsibility, to at least be a mentor. I think back and ask what is the one thing... "it was one great teacher, or an amazing coach, or a great sister." It was a combination of community really coming together. So, I take a lot of pride in the fact that I came from a really great community, and I want to make sure we build a great community. Every single thing really does affect homelessness and homelessness rates in San Antonio. Homelessness in return also effects a lot of things in San Antonio and Bexar County. [\(10:12\)](#)



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MOLLY: We know, in San Antonio, Texas, we have a major challenge around family violence, particularly domestic violence. We saw growth in the amount of people who are affected by family violence in homeless situations, living in shelters and unsheltered. We see that number kick up. So, as our family violence number kicks up, we saw more women with children homeless living in shelters and/or unsheltered. So, there's a direct cause and effect, right. There's a secondary piece. You talked very specifically about youth and sort of intervene and stop homelessness before it occurs. San Antonio and Bexar County just got a giant grant around youth homelessness. Is that right?

BRENDA: That is correct, yes. [\(10:55\)](#)

MOLLY: Can you speak a little bit about where that came from or the impetus for it, and what's happening with it?

BRENDA: Yeah, so we applied for a grant. We applied with the help of all our partners. We have so many partners really contribute to the application. North East ISD, the University, the Health System, everybody and anybody we reached out to, DFPS, Thrive, which is an organization that has really been active in this ever since the application process. So, we applied for that in April of last year, and we received notification in the summer that we received the largest amount ever recorded in the nation at \$6.88 million. Next year, or this year... wow. It's 2020. (laughs) I'm sure that happens to you guys all the time. So, this year we are hoping to launch a little more awareness around youth homelessness and also hopefully a community campaign on how we can leverage some more resources to really maximize that whole \$6.88 million for the whole community and leverage everything else that will come in the future right after that. So, right now, we are currently working with about 42 different partners to really allow us, or tell us how to use these funds. [\(12:25\)](#)

KIRAN: Can you tell us more about these organizations? I know you mentioned SAPD earlier, but paint for us the breadth and scope of folks that have to come together in order for us to reduce homelessness in San Antonio. [\(12:35\)](#)

BRENDA: So, currently, we have something we have Membership Council that covers all the organizations that touch homelessness. And then the Membership Council receives work groups, like a family workgroup or a veteran workgroup, and there's so many work groups and so many committees. We have a Coordinated Enter Committee. We have a Point in Time Committee. I think all that's great, and we've been doing that for a while now, but one of the things I would love to focus on in the near future... well, there's two things really. Housing. Getting some units on the ground. Making sure there are permanent, supportive housing for individuals that are homeless. We can have, I think, that we are doing an amazing job at Haven for Hope currently with all the services they're providing, the wrap-around services. At the same time, we need to work together as a community to make sure that when people are



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ready to leave, they have somewhere to go. That's one of the bigger initiatives. There's one more and that's making sure we look at homelessness as a system because it affects the health care system. It affects the education. It affects and touches every single other system. Really making sure that we know what the impact is, not just the economic impact, but the general impact of homelessness on the community. [\(14:02\)](#)

MOLLY: When we think about, again, it sort of goes back to what you were saying at the beginning. So, who are the people who are homeless right now. We started tracking homelessness because the Community Vision back in 2010, when we were just over 3,200 individuals. We are now down closer to 2,800 individuals, so small progress. Small progress, but still progress. When you start to disaggregate that information, when you start to see *who* are the individuals, you start to see that it's young people. If you look at it, it's 18% of our homeless population is under the age of 18 in 2019. When you're talking about housing, and you also have a very specific phrase that you use. It's rare, brief, and nonrecurring is what you want to see with our homeless populations. Can you speak more specifically about that phrase? Why those words? [\(14:59\)](#)

BRENDA: Sure, sure. So, I think that often sometimes people become homeless, and just because they become homeless doesn't mean they have to stay homeless in a homeless situation. We have a lot of work to do. We, as a community, even our language, you know, we were just talking about this in the office. Every single day, it's something else. It's another a-ha moment. Why do we use the phrase homeless? Why don't we use the phrase without homes? We should. We want it to be, as they are homeless, for it to be a very brief process. You enter a program, and before you know it, you get a house. If they are homeless, and we get them a house, they don't become homeless again because reoccurring events of homelessness is typical and getting back to the root of *why*. Also, just ending homelessness also sounds... you know, when I first started volunteering, I remember individuals telling me, "ending homelessness? Calm down, that sounds..." There's nothing wrong with saying it. Why not be bold? Why not believe that it's possible? Why not be excited that it's possible that one thing that we all deserve a home, somewhere to live, and strive to make sure that all families have somewhere to live where they feel safe. [\(16:32\)](#)

KIRAN: Yeah, the words rare, brief and nonrecurring make me immediately think of how the commitment to be proactive in this work rather than reactionary, which made me think about SAPD. We know this is a population around the country being criminalized for being without homes. Tell us more about that relationship with SAPD or the Sheriff's Office in supporting SARAH and being proactive. [\(16:59\)](#)

BRENDA: So, both Sheriff Salazar and Chief McManus serve on my board of directors of the CSC. They are both very supportive and willing to learn and collaborate when it comes to the issues. You know, we, as a community, I think, do a great job of backing each other up as well. They're on our committee, our Point in Time Count Committee. So, they come to our office



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twice a month at least and really ask us what else we need them from them. They help us with our mapping, our GIS to make sure that we are hitting every single spot in the city and Bexar County. So, they're just instrumental in making sure that we, that this is executed correctly, and that the training is there, and the individuals that are volunteering feel safe as well. [\(17:55\)](#)

MOLLY: Recently, we know that in San Antonio, that we have challenges around our housing affordability. We know, that one in two renters, are spending more than 30% of their income. That housing ownership is also sometimes out of our reach as well. I'm curious then, as you start to really focus on affordable housing as an entity, are you working with developers and housing people in an effort to figure out the why? [\(18:27\)](#)

BRENDA: Yeah. We don't necessarily know what our role will be, but if anything, if our role could be to coordinate, to encourage or to advocate for additional housing, and that's what we would love. As I told you before, my background is in affordable housing, and so I know a little bit about affordable housing. I also know that it works because I am a product of affordable housing, but at the same time, we don't know what exactly our role is going to be, but we know it's very important for us to get engaged, for us to have those conversations, and for people to start realizing that homelessness is connected to affordable housing and vice versa. [\(19:04\)](#)

MOLLY: We try to end all of our podcasts with a call to action. One, we will start saying "people without homes." Let's make that a call to action. What are the things somebody listening here want to get involved in, what should they do? [\(19:23\)](#)

BRENDA: Volunteer for our Point in Time Count. Just get involved. We also have a newsletter. It's extensive. We have everything and anything we could find on information about homelessness on our newsletter. If you are not part of one of our committees or groups already and feel like you could, let us know and reach out to us, and we can find out how we match up. Again, unfortunately, we don't provide any direct services for the homeless. That's hard for us, but at the same time, we have to do this part, so everybody else can do those very critical parts of providing direct services to the homeless, and look at it from a wide issue, and not just one service provider. [\(20:12\)](#)

MOLLY: Brenda, I appreciate so much the work that you do and for being here today and just giving us more information, so that we could learn more about the work that you do. Everything that you heard about today on The Story Goes can be found online at klrn.org/thestorygoes. Yeah, thank you for the work that you do. [\(20:32\)](#)

BRENDA: Well, thank you guys so much for having me and letting me talk about this and allowing people to learn more about people without homes. [\(20:41\)](#)



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