

THE STORY GOES | DAVID ZAMMIELLO | PROJECT QUEST

MOLLY: *Live*, from a darkened closet, at the KLRN studios, it's me! Molly Cox. And you are listening to The Story Goes, a collaborative podcast between SA2020, the nonprofit that drives progress towards San Antonio's shared Community Vision, and KLRN, your local public television station. With me today, as always, is Kiran Kaur Bains, who also works at SA2020. And our guest today is David Zammiello. I was putting an Italian spin on it for you. I felt good. I felt Soprano's like. (DAVID laughs) Today, we are going to talk to David about Project Quest, which we'll frame here in a bit to talk more specifically about the story within San Antonio about education and workforce, and understanding the need for helping our homegrown workforce get jobs that are available to them today. Project Quest plays a huge role in that, but I think more specifically, I want to talk about how, like many major initiatives in San Antonio, I don't want to name names, but also SA2020, there's a national focus on how *amazing* your organization is doing. This is like a model, a national model, and in San Antonio, it's not making as loud of an impact even though it's creating impact. We are not talking about it every single day, so I want to talk more specifically about the programs that you offer, and what you do, but I think it's important we keep talking about education and economic development in San Antonio, Texas. And we know, we have a workforce challenge, that we are not producing the people who can fill the jobs that are currently available, and it's something around our education system and our current workforce development process. Project Quest does the thing. [\(2:09\)](#)

KIRAN: Before we do a deeper dive into Project Quest, David, can you tell us more about your own leadership? I know before leading Project Quest, you, for three decades, were at USAA, what made you move over to the nonprofit sector? [\(2:21\)](#)

DAVID: Well, first of all, thank you for having me. I appreciate the opportunity. It's kind of an interesting story, but I did spend 32 years at USAA, retired as an Executive in 2016. Even at my time with USAA, I was involved in work around human resources, professional development, human development, there was always an underlying passion and interest in that. I just came to a point in my life that I felt that it was time for the next chapter, kick into the next chapter. So, I knew it time was to exit the corporate life, and I was very intrigued and passionate about the idea of education and workforce development, and how could that be something I could get involved with from a community impact standpoint, so I did. I retired in December of 2016 and was enjoying life really, really well. Got a phone call four months later, that offered this opportunity to me about Project Quest, and the interesting thing to your point, Molly, is that I didn't know what Project Quest was as an organization, and I had been in the community for 50 years. But when I saw what the mission was and the impact it was having on people's lives and really transforming them, it spoke to me. I think this was the place that had some value with my background. One thing led to another and low and behold I was hired in June of 2017, and it's



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been a little over two years, and it's been a great journey. Hopefully, I've been able to bring some of my corporate experience, if you will, to Project Quest. It's been a great journey. [\(3:48\)](#)

MOLLY: We are going to slip momentarily into this sort of narrative of the corporate sector sometimes retires super fancy executives, and then they think, "Oh, I'm going to help a nonprofit." There's that narrative that occurs. When you and I first met, and had a chat about it, you were like, "I'm ready to give back. I want to shift out of the corporate sector, and see what my next chapter is." You had no interest in going into the nonprofit sector. It wasn't that you were like, "Oh, I'm going to be a CEO now." Then you did. And it was hella harder than you thought. [\(4:27\)](#)

DAVID: Yeah, so to continue that thought process was "how can I give back to the community? And I thought there was many ways that could occur. It just so happened through coincidence the Project Quest opportunity presented itself. So, I didn't come out of my corporate life with this idea that I'm going to be a nonprofit. Whatever came my way, I was interested. This was the opportunity that presented itself, but once I looked into it, it's funny, I tell people this, "how hard can this be," so it's probably the intersection of arrogance and ignorance that said, "this can't be that hard." [\(5:06\)](#)

MOLLY: Well, it's also just the narrative. Nonprofits are those cute, little organizations—

DAVID: And I will tell you this, and you and I have talked about this, humbled me beyond belief. (MOLLY laughs) *Humbled beyond belief.* Hardest that I've worked with a different sense of accomplishment that comes with it. I have a great deal of respect for the people that work in the nonprofit sector, their hearts, their compassion to make the community a better place is amazing. So, I have grown as a person and professionally, just over the two years with my explosion of Project Quest and the people we've worked with. [\(5:40\)](#)

MOLLY: You're welcome that Project Quest also helped you in workforce development. (ALL laugh) It's helping everyone.

DAVID: It's never too late.

KIRAN: I appreciate hearing you think of the combination of arrogance and ignorance. I had someone tell me once before taking on a job that I was very excited about that I had the perfect amount of naivety and brain to take on the job. It was both an insult and a compliment at the same time. There's a story in Project Quest that is so compelling with its history. Tell us how Project Quest was born and how it remains very grassroots and community based. [\(6:19\)](#)

DAVID: That is a very important part of just the San Antonio story. So, as I said, when I learned about Project Quest and saw the mission, it drew me in. But if you back and look at the origin of



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Project Quest, it's an amazing story. So, if you go back to the early '90s, and I tip my hat and the COPS Metro, the Citizens Organized for Public Service, our Cops Metro, and our city government. Back in that day, if you think about what happened there, there was a closure of manufacturing plants—Levi Strauss and things like that—a lot of the employees there didn't have transferable skills for the jobs of the future. So, there was a built-up demand of how do we think about workforce training for these individuals that spoke to their parishes and one thing led to another, COPS Metro got involved, mobilized, and said there needs to be a workforce training program in this community. They then partnered and worked with the city at the time, Nelson Wolff was the Mayor, and Mr. Tom Frost and Mr. Charlie Cheever got involved, so those four entities came together to create Project Quest, which became the first of its kind workforce development program funded by the City of San Antonio. So, if you think about how Quest was stood up, it was a grassroots organization that COPS Metro gave birth to, funded by our local government. So, if you go over 20, 25 years of history, and that relationship has maintained itself. COPS Metro is very involved with Quest, but the success we've had is a combination of our COPS Metro support and the city government being our constant funding source. [\(7:57\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, I find that so interesting, sort of beginning because we talk all the time about our city government not being in the business of workforce, and here it has stood up this amazing organization that is not only helping people figure out different transferrable skills, but you have continuously evolved as community need has evolved and sorted of shifted the way your model is done, and the fact that the city continues to be a pretty significant partner for y'all, I think is an interesting story in and of itself. Our local government is taking a very serious partnership role in creating opportunities for our local workforce. [\(8:41\)](#)

DAVID: I think it also generates the conversation more philosophically of is this a good use of public dollars.

MOLLY: Right.

DAVID: So, as I've entered in the arena and had these conversations, and I talk about how hard the role can be, it is communication, collaboration, and demonstrating that there is a human side of this, but also a business side of how you are impacting the community. So, I tip my hat off to the founders who created the idea, the support of people like Mr. Tom Frost and Mr. Charlie Cheever and other organizations, and really building a relationship with our city council to give them confidence that these public dollars are being invested wisely. When we talk about workforce development, just in a more macro-level, Quest has had a proven track record for 27 years, but our role, it is a role in a broader workforce development discussion, so what I find beautiful about what we do, if you think about local community and our people, and the individuals that fall into the descriptor underemployed and under skilled who are looking for an opportunity to improve their station in life, Quest can become and does become that lifeline. If



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the person has the desire and will to invest in themselves, this becomes a pathway for them to do so. If you look at the local workforce and see we've got so many new jobs coming over the next ten years or so, but we've got people here that can do more than they're doing, so why not give them an opportunity to do so, and I think that's what Project Quest represents. It's a sense of hope and giving people the chance to live with dignity and empower them to move forward in their life, that I think is unique, and I think that's why we get the national recognition that we have. When we look at other cities, the way we are doing it here with Project Quest is different, and it's been sustainable because of the relationship with COPS Metro and the city government. So, it is unique, and I think we need to continue to celebrate what we are doing. (10:43)

MOLLY: Yeah, this sort of amazing public/private partnership. It's also this "yes, and" conversation. Right, we need to recruit people from out of town. That's why San Antonio is one of the top cities for college and millennial growth, *and* at the same time, we are the most income segregated city. We see per capita income just within a ten-mile radius just nearly doubles. If I live in District 5, City Council District 5 versus on the westside versus City Council District 9 on sort of northcentral, there's such a gap in the way that we are working. So, Project Quest offers the opportunity to do this "yes, and" conversation. (11:17)

KIRAN: Yeah. It's also a "yes, and" in the way that your programs are designed and your services are delivered that is, when we are having conversations about nonprofits or funders or philanthropy, we start using a lot of jargon. I know I'm guilty of this, too, around talking continuums of care and holistic approaches and various frameworks. When you look at Quest's work, y'all are so obviously saying, "Oh, in order to run a successful, nationally competitive re-training program. It's in addition to tuition, it's childcare assistance, it's rent and utility support, it's bus passes. There's such a clear understanding of what it means to make an impact in the full breadth on what it takes to be successful—

MOLLY: There's such intentionality and deliberateness when you deliver the programs that you deliver.

KIRAN: I was just going to add, it just seems obvious to me that you would operate in that way when it's rooted in community. (12:12)

DAVID: I think what makes Quest unique, I was just asked this question the other day, yes, there is language that we use wrapped around services to support people, but in reality, when you think about impact, those kinds of ideas, however you refer to them makes the difference. My learning, and I do say this has been the learning for the last 24 months is to have an impact, it has to have an intentionality to it. I use the words intense, intentional intervention in people's lives. It isn't just a financial discussion, but the services we provide. I think what makes Quest unique and successful is that we are intentional with building our relationships with our participants, and we stay with them from the time they join our program to the time they finish



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to the time they're ready for a job, and that is different because that takes a lot of effort to be that involved in someone's life. If they have situations that are fragile, or they need child support, gas for the car, whatever those are, we are there to help break down those barriers and make sure they're successful. [\(13:20\)](#)

MOLLY: There's something very specific about, we talk about this all the time, the community conditions take time to change, outcomes take time. If we are doing shifts in our community, it takes longer than here's your year's worth of funding go make all the changes happen, and a person comes into the program and (1) we need to know who this person is. We are building a relationship. We are making sure we are helping across the board. It's not just, "Hey, we will put you in this program. Here's your certificate. We will see you later." It's how are we making sure they are fully-supported in the work that they're doing. I'm curious, I know you've been around 27 years, is the conversation that you're having, not only with your funders, but the fact that the city supports it, it shows the city is investing in long-term strategy, and yet, when we talk about the city government, we are consistently talking about short-term, quick widget counting. It feels interesting to me that the city has invested, as long as it has, in a program that understands long-term investment, and that it's going to take a minute for us to see some serious outcomes out of this, and I'm curious about that relationship for y'all. [\(14:31\)](#)

DAVID: What I think is important about that is education, so again, my learning has been, we've got to work over that hump, that discussion, to do a better job of explaining what does Quest *actually* do, and how does that short-term versus long-term process actually work. So, Quest by definition, is referred to as a long-term training program. So, you're going to put someone in a program for 22 months, finish up, and move on. What I think is really important is things have changed. So, the ideas that started, when Quest started, about workforce training—

MOLLY: Times have changed, clothing has changed. (laughs)

DAVID: Everything has changed. I don't have my hair. It's all white now. But being able to convey that the idea that we are strictly a long-term training program, we are, but we approach it totally different. It's a funny place to be when you're saying trust me. We are going to demonstrate the outcomes along the way, but you have to be able to show some intermittent touch points to ensure you're making progress. We've gotten much better at informing and educating on those things. So, when you're talking about the national recognition that Quest has received, that has been very consistent for the history of Quest. I do think in the last couple of years, we have done a better job at telling our story locally. Our point of view is to be out there and collaborative. The more collaborative we are, the more we are partnering, and the appreciation and recognition that the program is having an impact is being more widespread throughout the community. [\(16:11\)](#)



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KIRAN: At SA2020, we call this celebrating incremental change, which I appreciate a lot because we know it takes time to do whole systems change. When we are talking about things like education and workforce development. It's our life's work and also it takes decades to change systems. This is reminding me of, there's a New York Times coverage, a national coverage recently, about Quest's work and how it's nationally competitive. Part of the narrative in this coverage, and also, I assume that follows Quest given what you're sharing with us about affecting change and what it even costs to run programs like this, how they get funded. So, part of this narrative says it costs \$11,000 per person. You're short-sighted in that perspective, that might seem outrageous to someone. Yet, y'all have been documenting what that return of investment looks like. Walk us through that and how it relates to incremental change. [\(17:04\)](#)

DAVID: It's been fastening, too. That \$11,000 number, we worked over the last year or so to really, that was a question I was getting. So, there's an investment in Quest from a funding standpoint, what is the cost to put somebody through the program? I correct the language and say it's not a cost. It's an investment. We are investing \$11,000 in a person over the duration of their time with us, whether it's in the healthcare field, information technology, or trade. And the question was, is that a good return on investment? Well, if you do the simple math that I walk people through, most of the people we are touching about 65% fall below the federal poverty line. Think about their starting point for an income, and most of the participants are making \$11,000 or \$12,000 a year and are on some form of public assistance. So, 22 months later, as you've finished your educational track and are now in a job paying \$42,000 or \$43,000 a year, you can see the simple math that says the funding that we provide to them in a whole through their training, and then they can get to an income of \$42,000 or \$43,000, that pays back to the community. The simple question, if you give me \$11,000, 22 months later that's \$42,000, and it's going to continue to invest. It's a good investment in a person. Obvious, it really is because that individual now is not taxed being on social services, but they're able to contribute. So, there's a dynamic to that goes into saying is that a good investment. We've broken it down in a way that says it is. It varies a little bit. \$11,000 is a good talking point, but it can vary from \$10,000 to \$12,000 depending on the duration of the program, if they're working healthcare, if they're taking a training in information technology or cyber security, or the trades field. I think that it puts some light on that's a good investment in a person. It changed their life, their family's life, and then contributed to the community in a different way. [\(19:10\)](#)

MOLLY: We used the SA2020 opportunity dividend with CEO's for Cities, and we talked about this originally, that if San Antonio decreased it's poverty by 1%, which is about 22,000 people, that the San Antonio MSA region could save about \$400 million in anti-poverty spending. The idea that you are moving people out of poverty, and I'm thinking about the numbers. 1% is just 22,000 people, and what we see, yet again, like our poverty rate in San Antonio is dependent on how we are looking at it from, whether it's inside the three-year average or not, so margins of error. It's either flat-lined, or it's getting worse, or mildly shifting. 22,000 people, and the



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amount of people you're serving every single year, there's \$400 million we could potentially be saving just based on Quest's work alone. [\(20:14\)](#)

DAVID: I get the question a lot, how can you scale? So, funding is a factor for the scaling. So, to your question, we are serving about 1,100 people on average a year. We are producing, so the main measure for our success for the community is, we are producing about 350 graduates who are placed in jobs every year. So, if you think about that right there, it's 350 folks that are now employed, and we've been pretty consistent with that number. The thing I point out is, another question I get is, are there any other agencies that provide similar type work? Molly, you know this as well, there are many nonprofits in this community doing amazingly, fascinating work, and some of them work with us in the nonprofit space, the answer I say back, is can the whole workforce ecosystem scale? Because I think we can do our part. We are a part of the discussion. We are not the sole answer. We are part of the workforce optimization strategy, but working with other partners, I think those kinds of numbers, we kind of collectively look at a way to get these parts to work together, it can have that kind of impact. I think that's where Quest has really tried to change its mindset. We are outward focused, tried to change its collaboration with partners, how do we tell our story, and how do we use our services to make the larger workforce ecosystem work for everybody. [\(21:34\)](#)

MOLLY: It's such an amazing, again, if we are talking about the story or the dominant narrative of how things are, it's just nonprofits are all duplicating. They're just all—wait, it's such a continuum of care. It's why the collaborations are so important. It's how we are able to expand and increase reach. It's that your focus is with these 350 people, who are then passed off to—there's so much of a continuum that's going on. The idea that you are sort of outwardly looking at who else is working on this ecosystem, and how can we better partner with them, do you have major collaborations that are the bread and butter of Project Quest? [\(22:18\)](#)

DAVID: We do. So, if you think about that idea, and I'll name a few just to give an example. So, we've had a relationship with AVANCE for several years, so how does that relationship work? So, their clients who are ready for an educational opportunity get referred to Project Quest. So, that's just one example, but expanding our network and making sure our partners out there. Classic example, just yesterday, and I'll give a shoutout to San Antonio Food Bank. Erica Cooper reached out and said, "let's sit down and have a conversation about how we can partner." So, those are the kinds of things we are now entertaining. How do we bring our services to be an extension, if you would, of maybe the foodbank services? That's what AVANCE is offering, and that's what it's been about with the collaboration and the synergy building those relationships. So, that's how we are trying to present ourselves. I think the larger discussion, and the community is open to that. We are slowly moving towards that. We just decided we are going to be very intentional on how we get out there and support. [\(23:23\)](#)



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MOLLY: There's something that you said very specifically about how it's not just workforce development, right? It's, I think the conversations that we are having, even locally, when we speak about how are we tackling something as complex as poverty in a community that has high levels of poverty—one of the most impoverished zip codes in the United States, most income segregated-- we could go on and on. I think the challenge consistently is giving a person a job does not get them completely out of poverty, breaking intergenerational poverty. It's having these discussions that you're having. If the Food Bank is talking about how do we collaborate with a workforce development organization, or if you're saying how does AVANCE and Project Quest work better together, again it's creating these wraparound services. It's not *just* the job. It's how are we helping people? [\(24:17\)](#)

DAVID: I'd be remiss if I didn't even point out the great work that Dr. Flores is doing at Alamo Colleges.

MOLLY: I mean, that guy, he's doing alright. (KIRAN laughs)

DAVID: When we talk about training, to be clear, when we talk about training, more than half of the Quest participants are actually students at SAC, St. Philip's, and Palo Alto. So, again, as a workforce collaborator, we don't do the training, but we make sure the training gets done. But the difference is we are hands on with those students making sure they finish their programs. So, again, the spirit of all that is working in the direction that I think is unique to San Antonio and gives us a fighting chance to have a long-term impact. [\(24:51\)](#)

KIRAN: My impression is that as folks around the country are looking at San Antonio, they're looking at Project Quest as a unicorn and saying this is an outlier. We don't see this kind of impact with these kinds of numbers. If we know what it takes, then how come this isn't happening everywhere? [\(25:06\)](#)

DAVID: I think there's a will factor. So, I'll give you a couple examples. The New York Times article that came out back in August, I'll make a plug here because I find it kind of fascinating. So, the article comes out, and one thing I didn't take account for was the rush of inquirers that came across the country. So, the Family Justice Center is one example. The Workforce Agency out of New York City, "Hey, we want to talk to you guys. How do you do what you do? Come talk to us and give us some insight." The thing that I would tell them and that I do tell them, is for an organization like Quest, you got to have that community backbone support, first and foremost. The support that we get from COPS Metro gives us a foundation to build upon. Then, you've got to have some commitment from your local government. Not just service, but commitment to stay with the program and give you a chance to get it running. You don't have that community support, that backbone, you can't get off the ground. The article just to kind of finish the thought, we got two dozen inquiries that we are vetting through right now. So, how can we help inform other communities about what Quest has done. I found it really cool, a



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foundation out of California just wrote us a letter and a check, and said, “Hey, you guys are doing great work. Here’s a donation for \$125,000.”

MOLLY: Yes, we agree! [\(26:31\)](#)

DAVID: And I said, yes, we are, and I’ll take that. (MOLLY laughs) Next, please! So, a lot of good things, and I think that’s also good for San Antonio. So, the point I try to tell folks is we are focused on what is good for the community. So, the recognition that Quest gets, we are promoting San Antonio. So, in the article by the New York Times, if you noticed it, it said something about Workforce (inaudible) San Antonio. That gives us a different perspective as a community that says we are trying to figure this out, and there’s organizations that are working on it, and we are willing to share. It gives us a different platform than other communities. [\(27:07\)](#)

MOLLY: It’s so people-powered first, I think. It’s like grounded in human beings, understanding that human beings are different, need different things.

DAVID: And I’ll just say this, Molly, to make sure I finish all my thoughts on this, what makes Quest really drive is our staff. So, our career coaches and what they give of themselves to make sure these people are successful, it’s beyond your traditional case management discussion. There’s a lot of piece parts we’ve got into it over the last few years. My learning has been “wow, what did I get myself into” to “Wow, this is really beautiful.” This ranges from our Board to our COPS Metro to our city to our staff to make it work. And then, our approach is to be more collaborative, more out there in our community, more for the greater good. [\(27:55\)](#)

MOLLY: David, we like to end every podcast with a call to action. We force that upon you as we’ve been talking, so you don’t have any time to think about it. And then, we say, “give us the call to action!” It’s our favorite part to set you up with that. We want to make sure that everyone knows anything we talk about on the podcast today is obviously available to you at klrn.org/thestorygoes. But what’s somebody’s listening, just heard about Project Quest for the first time or got more information than they ever heard before, what’s your call to action? [\(28:26\)](#)

DAVID: I’ll tell you what, if you would, actually if you’re listening go to www.questsa.org. There’s a lot of information there. We have our annual event coming up. Our annual luncheon is on December 5 at the Witte. It’s where the community comes together. It’s where Quest gives its report card out to the community. If you’re interested in wanting to know more about that, go to the website. Think about coming to the luncheon and supporting Quest. You’ll see it’s a collective, collaborative effort, and there’s more than one way to get involved.

MOLLY: You also want to turn your nose up to a \$125,000 matching grant. (KIRAN laughs)



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DAVID: Yeah, everybody write a check! If 125,000 people wrote a \$1 check, I'm good. We'll take all.

MOLLY: I appreciate so much the intentionally that Project Quest works. The fact that you are creating these ripples of change in our community, and I am happy that you're an SA2020 partner.

DAVID: We are happy to be one. (29:26)

MOLLY: And you're alright as a human.

DAVID: Thanks, so are you!

MOLLY: Thanks, I try. Kiran, did I miss anything?

KIRAN: No, we got it. I think our whisper is "Intense intentional intervention."

MOLLY: Let's see if we can do it altogether. Don't forget klrn.org/thestorygoes. Yeah, let's see. Can we do it altogether on a three? Wait, "Intense, intentional intervention." Okay. I got it. One, two, three.

ALL: (whispers) Intense, international intervention. (29:58)



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