

Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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Kirt Jacobs: Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and sometimes legends and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where previous interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, nationally renowned sports writers, some sports legends, heads of major business concerns, community activists, and developers. Today our guest is Cynthia Knapek she is the executive director of Brightside Inc. I want to read a bit of her bio to you if you're not familiar with her. Prior to being appointed executive director of Brightside by Louisville Metro Mayor Jerry Abramson in April 2003 her background is a bit eclectic for such a young leader. She received a bachelor's degree in communication and a Masters in Education from the University of Louisville. She has even been trained in grant writing at the Indiana University School of Philanthropy. From 1995-1999 Cynthia held the position of banking center manager for Fifth Third Bank and from 1999-2003 Cynthia was the director of education for the Kentucky Organ Donor Affiliates of Louisville which is a statewide public relations and community education program.

While there, listen to this, she wrote three federal grants and several community grants totaling over one hundred thousand dollars. If anyone's ever written a grant that is not an easy feat. Her desire to make a positive impact on the city carries over to significant volunteer contributions with such notable accolades as in 1993 she became a Kentucky Colonel. In 1994 she was a Kentucky Derby Festival Princess. Nice touch. Though in 1999-2000 she is most proud of her work as a founding member and the first president of something

near and dear to my heart Y-PAL the Young Professionals Association of Louisville. In 2001 she was recognized as one of Business First's Top Forty Under Forty community leaders and in 2006 she was given the Way to Go Award by Today's Woman magazine. However one of her major successes came in 2004, listen to this folks, when she accomplished great success on the award winning Gala Palooza Project raising eight hundred thousand dollars for Brightside and other local nonprofits. And that's the little horse back there. We'll talk about that in a second.

I want to read a quote of hers I think really embody Cynthia quote The question was what do you think is the role of young people in Louisville. This is a from a 2004 article. "The role of young people in Louisville is I think twofold. I've mentioned before the importance of giving back to the community. I think one way you can do that is through volunteerism. But the second is to be active in the community. Don't sit back and be passive. If things don't look right to you then be part of the solution." I think that is a very profound quote. I like that. She and her husband Mark and her son Todd are proud to call Louisville home. However before we begin the interview the I want you to tell the audience a little bit about the mission of Brightside if you could do that.

Cynthia Knappek: Brightside is a public private partnership and our mission is to engage the people who live here in cleaning green activities. And one of the ways that we do that is really through volunteerism.

Kirt Jacobs: OK I'm going.. Before we get into our interview again I'm going to ask another question. What did it feel like when you got that call from Mayor Abramson to the head up Brightside. I would like to hear maybe a little back story if you in a minute or two you could share that.

Cynthia Knappek: Sure I actually was working for the organ donor program which is a job that I loved very rewarding and was not necessarily looking to leave that program. But I spoke with some people here at Metro government because I had been involved in the Young Professionals Association. I knew a lot of people that

were working for government. And my involvement with Y-PAL really kind of got me interested in civic engagement

Kirt Jacobs: Sure.

Cynthia Knapek: So when the opportunity came up to work for Brightside I was really excited. Although I confess I knew nothing about growing flowers. You know

Kirt Jacobs: Full disclosure.

Cynthia Knapek: That was a little daunting but the idea of a Brightside as a tool to get people engaged the idea of using clean and green activities as a way is a really easy way for people to roll up their sleeves and participate in their community. That was really what was the most exciting part about getting this often.

Kirt Jacobs: Appears to be a good fit. Almost a million bucks with the horses back there which we will talk about shortly. Our first question we ask all our guests is what drives you to do this? I mean there would be certain leaders I think at Brightside and then there's you.

Cynthia Knapek: Civic pride

Kirt Jacobs: Is it

Cynthia Knapek: Yeah it's really civic pride. I've lived in Louisville my whole life. And I just have a great feeling about my hometown and the desire to to have an impact and to run a program that has a visual and immediate improvement is really what drives me. And what's most rewarding.

Cynthia Knapek: Whom do you credit most influential in your life? And as we ask all our guests it can be professional and personal. Whom might that be?

Cynthia Knapek: I think that better word has to go to my parents. I really have wonderful parents. I'm am one of six kids.

Kirt Jacobs: Wow

Cynthia Knappek: I'm the oldest of six kids, My parents are very young so I kind of grew up with them and we learned a lot together.

Kirt Jacobs: That's great. What was the most defining moment of your life.?

Cynthia Knappek: The most defining moment,,

Kirt Jacobs: You are fairly young. If there is one.

Cynthia Knappek: I think that it clearly has to be the birth of my first child. Personally that changes your life and your world view. Professionally probably making the decision to move from Third Bank to the organ donor program. And I..

Kirt Jacobs: Quite a change

Cynthia Knappek: Yeah it really is. You know working in you know for a large corporation there is more money and there's sometimes more opportunity to advance.

Kirt Jacobs: Career wise or what have you

Cynthia Knappek: But when I started to work with the Young Professionals Association I just kind of got that bug.

Kirt Jacobs: It kind of gets you doesn't it.

Cynthia Knappek: It really does and that's probably the most defining is the decision that I really wanted

Kirt Jacobs: Appears to be a great decision so far. If there is one and we ask all our guests this what is your biggest professional regret? In other words is there something you would have done differently. Looking back so far you think

Cynthia Knapek: No you know and I've had that conversation. Particularly when I've talked to people about my background and they say oh you know the bank and you know. Do you regret the time that you spent there? That you didn't get involved with you know civic leadership sooner and the answer is no I don't because you know every every road that you take you gain things. You are the sum of your experiences. I guess that's the shortest way to say that. And so if any of those experiences if I hadn't had those then I might be a different person and they're not always fabulous experiences but I don't have any regrets.

Kirt Jacobs: What is your big... On the flip side of it what is your biggest professional triumph? You may have already touched upon it.

Cynthia Knapek: Biggest professional triumph

Kirt Jacobs: Can be personal too I guess

Cynthia Knapek: Twofold tremendously proud of Gala Palooza and all the money it raised for the community, Not just money for Brightside. But Gala Palooza raised money for lots of non-profits. So I think that that's definitely one of the accomplishments that I'm most proud of but on a completely different level when I worked for the organ donor program and I did public education. I had a family member come up to me who's who lost a loved one and their family member had become a donor and it was because of an education that they had received from us from the people on my staff there. Their daughter was a high school student that had gone through one of our education program. And came home and said Mom I think this is really the thing that we all out of do it's a wonderful way to save a life. And as a result of that her daughter was in an accident later and they were they were able to donate her organs. And so you know I mean several people received life as a direct result of the work that we were doing there.

Kirt Jacobs: Good stuff. I'm going to twist back to a bit of a more lighter note. You mentioned Gala Palooza some of audience might

know that and that's what this horse represents. Twofold question could you tell us the genesis of Gala Palooza? Kind of how it started. Was it taken from another city's idea? Because those things inundated this city I forget what year it was but it was phenomenal.

Cynthia Knappek: It was.

Kirt Jacobs: It was yours.

Cynthia Knappek: It was a tremendously fun project to work on. It was a huge project and it basically started with John Conti.

Kirt Jacobs: OK.

Cynthia Knappek: He did actually see the idea somewhere else that he had traveled I think he saw the cows in Chicago. And he came back and said we need to do this here. And the timing wasn't right and so I didn't quite take off for him initially. But when this mayor came back into office he said I have just the project that's going to give you know merged government and the new Metro Louisville some splash And and so the mayor said I think it sounds great. It might be a good project for Brightside and so we talked about it.

Kirt Jacobs: So John Connolly approached the mayor which then approached Brightside

Cynthia Knappek: The Brightside board initially had a lot of reservations about doing that.

Kirt Jacobs: Did they?

Cynthia Knappek: Yeah because I was brand new. And I had only been with Brightside a couple of months and so they were concerned about you know too much too soon. But because John Conti had assembled such a fabulous group of community leaders I just knew in my gut that it was going to be a great project. Yeah so I talked to the board and I kind of stuck my neck out a little bit and said trust me. I think this is going to be a really fabulous project. And we've got a whole bunch of great people involved with it

and so as a result it did turn out really well and we had the beautiful horses.

Kirt Jacobs: You had a big auction too I think afterwards. Is that correct?

Cynthia Knappek: Yeah yeah and that was a tremendously nerve wracking experience.

Kirt Jacobs: Mellwood Arts Center was it?

Cynthia Knappek: No actually we have we did have some events there at the Mellwood Arts Center but we had our final auction at the Palace. And it was a live auction and so you know you you do everything you can to make sure it's successful but when the auctioneer stands up there on stage to take you know the first bids.

Kirt Jacobs: Right.

Cynthia Knappek: Everybody just kind of holds their breath and says please someone bid and the first horse went for like I think eighteen thousand dollars.

Kirt Jacobs: Oh my gosh.

Cynthia Knappek: So yeah I think it was it was it was a great great experience.

Kirt Jacobs: I can only imagine. How many horses were there?

Cynthia Knappek: There were there about 225 horses and they're all gone now. There are are a few around the city. There's a few here and there I'm constantly surprised. I drove past a tire store kind of in the West End and there's one right there in front of a tire store. So you know you never know when you're going to see one.

Kirt Jacobs: I just want to do to indulge on that because I think it's a great aspect an example of leadership what you did with this one of the audience to hear about that a little more detail. What you

find exciting about all of this that you're doing with Brightside? is it everything that you thought would be or is it more?

Cynthia Knappek: I think it's more. Some good more some bad more. You know it is when you work for I'm so impressed by all of the people that are involved with city government. It's a whole different degree of commitment and a lot of the leaders are engaged in all the different aspects of government are truly committed and they live, eat, sleep, breath the betterment of the city. And so I think I didn't quite understand exactly how much it takes over your life.

Kirt Jacobs: Yes yes it does. I bought the T. shirt.

Cynthia Knappek: You drank the Kool-Aid.

Kirt Jacobs: As the mayor always puts it there are citizens and then there's residents. I think we become citizens anyway I digress. What is the best advice that was ever given to you coming up?

Cynthia Knappek: My father told me that you spend so many of your waking hours working that it's important to your to your own peace of mind and to your happiness in life that you really enjoy what you do. And that's a large reason why I left you know the corporate sector and went to do nonprofit work is because of that advice. And I think it is really important. Whatever you're doing you have to have passion. And I think that's that's probably the best advice that I've ever gotten.

Kirt Jacobs: That is good advice. It's very good advice. Can you define leadership in one word? Again this is a Leadership Landscape that's what this shows about. It can be more than one word as always to our guests in the great English lexicon.

Cynthia Knappek: Courage

Kirt Jacobs: OK. Can you explain that a little?

Cynthia Knappek: I think you have to have courage. I think that lead-

ership is about putting yourself out there and about trusting the people that are following you that they have your support. But ultimately I think that you have to be able to take a few risks and and that's what moves our city and our society forward are those people that are willing to kind of take a step out.

Kirt Jacobs: Courage is probably going to the board when you pitched the Gala Palooza.

Cynthia Knapek: Yeah that took a little bit of courage.

Kirt Jacobs: It is a very good example. If you could change one thing Cynthia be it in your own life or in general what would it be?

Cynthia Knapek: If I could change one thing in my life...

Kirt Jacobs: It can be global or local. It can be.. You can interpret that question any way you like.

Cynthia Knapek: Oh wow. That is a lot of territory to cover. You know I am so fortunate in my life. I'm so blessed. You know from my family and the help of my family to having a wonderful job. You know a short of the things that everyone wishes I wish I would win the lottery.

Kirt Jacobs: Right right.

Cynthia Knapek: That I could could travel. You know and then I could just volunteer my time whenever I chose. I'd think that the my life is incredibly fulfilling. So there's not a whole lot I would change.

Kirt Jacobs: That's an answer too. I wouldn't change a thing. I don't see anything wrong with that. Could you describe in detail the particular incident or scenario in your professional or personal life where you utilize your style of philosophy on leadership? You may have touched upon it a little bit earlier but we like to ask that question.

Cynthia Knapek: My general philosophy has a lot to do with being fair and flexible.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Cynthia Knapek: And I think that a lot of times people think being fair and flexible are mutually exclusive. In order to be fair you have to be rigid that you have to you know follow the prescribed methodology in all circumstances. And I think that flexibility has really been the key to my success in several different aspects. When we sat down and did the Brightside strategic plan you know I engaged all of the staff. And the staff is really one of the ways that that I'm able to touch the most amount of citizens is through making sure that my staff you know shares the same vision for a Brightside of actually getting. You know to ripple from not just our staff..

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Cynthia Knapek: ...to everyone in the community. So when we sit down and we think about goal setting you know it gives them an opportunity to you know to get on board and to set what they think are fair goals. You know so we work with the whole let's make sure of it that we have a realistic and a fair approach but then we continue to meet to make sure that that we're being flexible. If you set forth and you say this is the plan but if you get halfway into the plan and you realize you know this is not quite as we pictured it and then you have to be able to do a little bit of midfield running I guess is what the board likes to call it. Gala Palooza I one of the reasons it was so successful is because we were willing to be a little bit flexible. You know and you know you can be the leader and not have to take a rigid stance. You can listen to what everybody has to say and then say OK well we need to change this. We need to modify and I think what ends up is A you get the trust of your people and B you get a much better end product.

Kirt Jacobs: This is a question that we ask all of our guests do you think there's a difference today in our leaders when there was in past generations? You know we both grew up in Louisville it's changed dramatically in the last 20-30 years definitely 40 years.

Kirt Jacobs: What do you say to that?

Cynthia Knapek: You know I love history. And I have you know read some of the biographies of Eleanor Roosevelt and summarize really fabulous people. And I think that definitely leadership has changed. I think a lot of that has to do with advancing technology or communications and media and the and really the unforgiving nature of our community not necessarily just Louisville but on the whole. You know when you read all these wonderful biographies of leaders in the past they all had skeletons. They all had flaws. They were all you know human beings.

Kirt Jacobs: They also didn't have cable like we have to deal with.

Cynthia Knapek: That's right.

Kirt Jacobs: The media outlets.

Cynthia Knapek: That's right

Kirt Jacobs: Worldwide information systems that we have.

Cynthia Knapek: I think a lot of that is good because it forces people to be transparent.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure

Cynthia Knapek: You know so so I think that we're our leaders today are maybe a little bit sharper you know.

Kirt Jacobs: Things move pretty quick. This question we also like to ask our guests. Let's say the mayor calls you up and says you've done a wonderful job with Gala Palooza. You know what turn in your Blackberry. Your cell phone what have you turn off your e-mail account. You can take your family with you or not and don't worry about the expense what have you take two weeks. Get lost come back in two weeks. What would you do with those two weeks?

Cynthia Knapek: I'd go to Italy

Kirt Jacobs: Would you really?

Cynthia Knapek: I have really enjoyed some fabulous travel opportunities to all sorts of you know really wonderful places. And I think Italy's one of my favorite. The pace there is slow. People seem to have a zest for life. I love the art and the architecture. You know when you are in America and you see a building that's 100- years-old everybody goes Oh wow that building 100- years-old but when you visit Europe and you see these buildings that you know... I go 100-years-old as you know that's it's nothing. I mean the downtown buildings are 300-years-old. You know so I would definitely take some time and travel but particularly Italy's one of my favorite.

Kirt Jacobs: So would you take your family.

Cynthia Knapek: Yeah Yeah I would take the family.

Kirt Jacobs: It's on the record

Cynthia Knapek: It wouldn't be the same without the family.

Kirt Jacobs: Sure you'd probably worry or what have you.

Cynthia Knapek: My you know you've got to have people to share it with. It's no fun to stand there and point to the great wonders of the world and you know tap stranger next to you.

Kirt Jacobs: Have you been over there before you said?

Cynthia Knapek: I have. I've been to Italy a couple of times. My cousin Christine just married there a couple years ago.

Kirt Jacobs: Oh really. That's a good reason to go. Were you in the wedding or were you..

Cynthia Knapek: I think I was a reader in the wedding. She keeps telling me that we are planning an anniversary trip to go back.

Kirt Jacobs: So there you go there are your two weeks so to speak. This is a question we like to ask all our guests young or old. When the great day comes how do you want to be remembered? You know you've got a lot of chapters left. Any again all our guests interpret that in many different ways that question but you know God forbid you walk out of here and something was to happen. How would you like to be remembered for what you've done so far.

Cynthia Knapek: Mostly I think I'd like to be remembered as a wonderful mother and a loving wife and I think third are the things that have to do with civic leadership and having an impact. You know with Brightside the thing that I'm trying to do is to extend that sense of ownership. And if I get someone out to volunteer for a couple of hours maybe they're just picking up litter but really what I've done is I've created that sense in them that it's not just about my front yard but it's about down the street and around the block. And so if I'm able to be remembered for you know having that impact and having created a hometown of you know an atmosphere where that's what they say about Louisville is that you know everyone there is committed and cares about their community and that would be important.

Kirt Jacobs: I want to backup here a second on that and ask you about the Brightside model. Are we we kind of the litmus test nationally are there other cities doing that? Probably a question I should have asked earlier but I was just curious if you could maybe elaborate on that briefly.

Cynthia Knapek: Well Brightside is part of a Keep America Beautiful..

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Cynthia Knapek: ...affiliation.

Kirt Jacobs: Like Sister Cities or something like that?

Cynthia Knapek: Kind of like that. There are chapters located all

over the United States and they're all set up a little bit differently. I think Brightside is clearly one of the best of their of its kind in the nation. And the public private partnership model is really interesting and for us the way it works here is that Metro government covers our staff salaries and some overhead. And then all of our program money is raised privately.

Kirt Jacobs: OK

Cynthia Knapek: So that makes it really unique. And then just the fact that we have such a great volunteer base. We have about seven thousand people who volunteer with us..

Kirt Jacobs: Really

Cynthia Knapek: Yeah

Kirt Jacobs: Is that regionally, locally? Do we have people come in nationally too?

Cynthia Knapek: No. That that's our Louisville metro area.

Kirt Jacobs: You're kidding. Wow.

Cynthia Knapek: That's actually the kind of a drop in the bucket. I mentioned that we just went through our strategic planning process and that's one of the really big initiatives that we have this to grow that from seven thousand to ten thousand to 20 thousand. To just really use it as a tool to get everyone in the community engaged. So those are probably some of our strengths as far as you know where we stack up nationally in our model.

Kirt Jacobs: That's great. It's really great segment as well. I hadn't heard that. It's a great note to end on.

Cynthia Knapek: You know actually just a few weeks ago we had our community wide cleanup. That was just one Saturday and we had three thousand people out that one Saturday alone.

Kirt Jacobs: Wow

Cynthia Knapek: So I'm sure this year will get well above that seven thousand.

Kirt Jacobs: Well Cynthia thanks for being on Leadership Landscape. It's quite a pleasure.

Cynthia Knapek: It was wonderful

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Kirt Jacobs: Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at kirt@moxietalk.com or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at www.moxietalk.com