

LAUREN RELIFORD

NCSSS ALUMNI AND POLITICAL DIRECTOR
AT SOUJOURNERS

Albano: What is your day like at Sojourners?

Lauren Reliford: I don't really have a normal day to day just because the political environment is so crazy. The cornerstone of my job is info processing, so very much like social work and having sort of all of this information and then being able to diagnose the problem based on what you understand. I try to start my day with just catching up, reading the news, figuring out what happened between the time we shut off our computer and the time I turned it on, because so much can happen. I sort of see all of our social justice portfolio and that ranges from women and girls, to immigration, to economic justice, to racial justice, to nonviolence and peace.

My goal is to translate from a multinational of macro level what is happening and how that's going to impact folks at the micro level. I have to ask what does that mean for us moving forward. Do we need to do an action alert, to get folks to call in and speak to their very real lived experience? That bolsters my ability to go to a member of Congress, or a staffer, or talk to the White House and say, "you guys should do this because this is what our mobilizing and advocacy folks are saying." So a lot of it is political landscaping and information processing with that thought in mind, it's connected to very real people. And what does this mean for them?

There's lots of connecting to different coalitions. I rely a lot on coalition work just because, again, it's very hard to keep my finger on the pulse of everything. So there's a few different coalitions that I belong to on criminal justice reform. So last Thursday. I was in meetings in the morning about build back better with the Senate, and then I was meeting to talk about filibuster reform and criminal justice and policing executive orders. And then I had a meeting later to talk about the Electoral Count Act and voting rights. It's a lot.

Albano: Tell me more about your coalition work?

Lauren Reliford: We are part of a few different coalitions. There's Circle of Protection, USCCB Catholic Charities Quaker, Friends Committee, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The groups that I engage with are predominantly faith-based or interfaith, mostly with some secular partners.

The meetings tend to be info sharing and it's great because we're coming from a moral perspective. We're mixed methods and that we are spiritual and scientific. Thanks to my background and my taking clinical classes at NCSSES, I can talk about what poverty means as a trauma to the body, as an adverse childhood experience and what that does to a child. And then also and say, this is why we need stronger maternal, newborn and child health programs, but then also go back to scripture and say, you know, in Matthew 25, also says this. And so that's the really fun part of my job is being able to. Become a student of scripture again. I get to ask what is Isaiah really telling us? What is Jeremiah saying to us? What is Luke saying? And that's what makes the work so unique is that there's this moral framework for decision making. I would be very honest.

I don't think I would be as successful in this role, as hopefully I think I am, if I had not gone to NCSSS. If I had not taken the classes that I did, with the professors that I did, with the people that I had in class, because there's a lot that I have been able to apply to the day to day. In creating campaigns and even project management, there's parts of the program that I've been able to apply. And that is what education's supposed to be, right?

Once you get in a real world situation, then that's when you take your skills and your understanding of the actual reality and make your assessment. You make your diagnosis and then prescribe a treatment and then go through monitoring and evaluation. It really gave me a compendium of knowledge that I can consistently pull from. When I recently wrote a letter to a congressional committee, I even took some of some parts of the paper that I'd written.

Albano: What were some lessons from your time at NCSSS that you use now?

Lauren Reliford: I would say neurobiology, clinical social work, psychodynamic theory and community organizing. I took international social work because I wanted to understand global policy from a social work perspective. Theory was super tedious, but it's very helpful for communicating to other folks expectations based on how I understand the system. And it also just made me a better manager because as director, I do have to manage people, and that's a huge task. Even basic generalist classes where we're teaching diagnosis and assessment principles, I treat meetings like I'm leading a lot like a group session. And those are things that I learned in generalist class. I really feel I was able to get a lot out of my time and I feel like it's continuing to actualize. I really thought about what was being offered and what I thought I would need, and for the most part, it's all come together quite nicely.

Albano: Why did you choose Catholic University? What was it about NCSSS that spoke to you?

Lauren Reliford: I was getting my MSM in the Bush School of Business because I ventured into mental health policy. And I had been a public health lobbyist for about 10 years. And I was burnt out, had no idea what to do. And so when you're in your thirties and you have no idea what to do, you just go to grad school. And so I initially wanted to create, for lack of a better word, a halfway house, for folks who were being discharged from inpatient behavioral health facilities in D.C. I had no idea that social workers did mental health. I'll be quite frank. I just thought they took babies away because that's the stereotype. And when I realized that I could do mental health and learn about it. The mental health system for folks like myself and others who didn't have access to the same kind of resources, I was like, "Oh, I can do something here."

So, I attended a session and I found out that they had the combined degree where you could do clinical and macro. And for me, that made the most sense because the best policy advocates are those that have some clinical understanding of the issue and then can translate that to the macro setting. I've always gone to parochial schools and that education for me is really important because I want to be able to talk about things from a spiritual or scriptural lens. I want my education to be seen in that spiritual liberal arts education because that's certainly my worldview. I looked up the professors and saw the environment that I want to be in because they have folks that are researching these things that I'm fascinated with and they're going to be able to bring that into class and share with us not just what's on page, but what I'm doing as a practitioner.

Catholic just seems to be the place where God was calling me to. This is where I'm supposed to be. And it wasn't easy. It's not perfect, right? I had my issues, but I think that this is one of the best things that's ever happened to me personally and professionally and I knew that it would challenge me not just academically, but I knew it would challenge me and help me grow as a person. And it did. And that's what I'm forever grateful for. I might get a little emotional, but that's what I'm really grateful for.

Albano: After you graduated you were able to find a position at Sojourners. What was it about their mission that was a calling for you?

Lauren Reliford: And I'll also give a shout out here to Dean Zabora, because in February of last year, They said, "You should really look at faith based organizations." I didn't even think that faith based organizations did advocacy like that.

And at first I was looking primarily for maternal, newborn, and child health. And then Sojourners came up. I had never heard of Sojourners before which was bad because they've been around for 50 years and I looked at their articles and I was like, "Oh, these are my kind of Christians." They do scriptural study and really think about what the Bible is telling us and what that means in modern times. And they were asking themselves the kind of questions that I found myself asking, and it seemed like they were writing articles on the work.

And then when I looked at their advocacy page their whole idea is sort of like faith and action. That's what really got to me, because it's this notion that we're not just called to be Christian, we're called to act like Christians.

And for us, it's not just enough to say we support x y z. By getting boots on the ground, by going in and sharing that vision and sharing that knowledge and trying to shape policy so that way our socio political culture is reflective of this vision. How are we following in Christ's footsteps and what does that mean? And I think for me, that has always been what it means to be a Christian. It's a call to action. And so I really appreciated that I would be able to go in there and do something that aligns with me personally. Because I've worked in places where it was just a job. It didn't necessarily align with the vision.

But I know from previous experiences, it matters a lot when you do work that you believe in. And when I did the informational interview and they were like, "are you going to be OK with going to chapel? Are you going to be OK with the fact that we pray before meetings?"

And it's like, yeah, making these things intentional? That's great!

Albano: Sojourners has a really interesting history. Do you think it's possible to create a community today similar to that of Sojourners when they moved to DC in 1975?

Lauren Reliford: I believe so. My whole worldview is very communal whereas Western approaches are very individual, dualistic society. Yes, that may be the dominant social approach, but I think there's a lot of folks who grew up really understanding that yes, I have rights, but I have a responsibility to a larger group of people. And so we do carry on that iteration, we have a fellows house close by in Columbia Heights. But that's where they bring post-grad and grad students together in fellowship.

And I think from a policy perspective we certainly do that. My boss, Reverend Adam Russell Taylor, actually wrote a book, *A More Perfect Union*, in which he sort of creates this framework for creating a beloved community. And so when you have a president who really is focused on community and what are the things that we need to create community as Christians, it makes it really easy to be able to replicate that model because it just becomes very apparent to folks who come to Sojourners. And I'm going to totally toot my coworkers horn, but there's some really special people that work there. Some of the most amazing human beings I've ever met. They come to Sojourners because they believe in the mission. There's something that spoke to them about the history. They wanted to be part of this community. We really do model community internally with ourselves and then that gives us even more strength.

And I think it makes it easier to model the community externally because you're already doing it. That structure was already there. I really love that question because I think there's an intention that's part of the unstated mission in everything we do. How is this building community? And what is community?

Albano: Do you have any advice for any NCSSS students who might be anxious about what lies after graduation?

Lauren Reliford: Accept the anxiety, because it's normal. Because it's a big deal. But be very intentional about where you search. You might make it to a point where you just kind of have to take a job, just to take a job.

But that doesn't mean that the place that God intended you to be is not there. Jeremiah 29:11 says, "for I know the plans that I have for you". And God is promising that he has a good plan. And so stay confident in the fact that you know your stuff and you are trained really well. And God has gotten you to this point for a reason. He's not going to let you fail. Also just lean into your connections, unfortunately, at least in D.C., it really is who you know. But once you get in the door, that's kind of it. But lean into your relationship skill building that you learn while you're an NCSSS and find the community, find the spaces that are achieving your goal. And if you are mission oriented, like if it really does matter to work in a place that aligns with your morals, values, and mission, go there. Find that place, because that's the place where everything is going to actualize.

And I think that that's probably some of the advice I'd give, because that's certainly the advice that Dean Zakk gave me. And I would also just say, don't hesitate to explore the faith based space. There are a lot of amazing organizations that are doing amazing work. And if you want to go to one that's more denomination focused, there is a network lobby. There's the Evangelical Lutheran Church Association, there's the Episcopalians, there's a faith based space for you. And if that matters to you, definitely find that because they're looking for talent. And I think that NCSSS grads, especially macro folks would find a really amazing home at some of these organizations.

Albano: Thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time.
