

An Interview with Julie Murray

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

Produced by:

The University of Nevada Las Vegas
The Lincy Institute
2024

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The following interview was a part of the “Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada” research project. The recorded interview and transcript were made possible through the generosity of The Lincy Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The goal of the project was to understand and document how Nevada organizations and leaders responded to the myriad challenges that the pandemic engendered. The interviewees thank The Lincy Institute and their supporters for the opportunity to reflect on their roles throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of the project: Dr. John Hudak, Dr. Makada Henry-Nickie, Elia Del Carmen Solano-Patricio, Taylor Cummings, Peter Grema, Kristian Thymianos, Saha Salahi, Madison Frazee, and Katie Lim.

Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Julie Murray, Principal and CEO and President of Moonridge Group, and was conducted on 9/15/22 by Kelliann Beavers. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Julie Murray

Date: 9-15-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Julie Murray

Kelliann Beavers [00:03]

Okay. So, to confirm, you have reviewed the information form, and you are comfortable with us recording the interview and using your name, if we quote you, as long as you review the transcript first.

Julie Murray [00:16]

I have, and I agree.

Kelliann Beavers [00:18]

Okay. The first question is very general. Can you describe your role in your organization?

Julie Murray [00:22]

Yes, we are a philanthropy advising firm, Moonridge Group. The Moonridge Foundation is a 501(c)(3) grant-making foundation. So, I serve as the Board Chair for the Foundation, and the CEO of the for-profit entity.

Kelliann Beavers [00:40]

That's great. The next question is, how did you see your role or your organization's role during the pandemic?

Julie Murray [00:48]

It became a heightened sense of urgency to step up. Because we've been in business for 11 years, and we spent many of those formative years building trust. And you know the importance of trust in philanthropy and community. And when COVID hit, rather than, as I was mentioning when I saw you on Friday, rather than holding our quarterly meetings, we moved to weekly.

Kelliann Beavers [01:14]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [01:16]

And rather than keeping our Corporate Funding Group separate from our Family Foundation Group, we brought them together, so that they could, every single week in Las Vegas, every single week in Reno, could hear directly from healthcare leaders, mental health leaders, education leaders, and hear about the struggles, real-time, by the experts, and make their philanthropy split-second. And it was so helpful to see the community leaders say, "We need help here," and the philanthropists stepped up. It was beautiful to see the way that the community rose to the challenge.

Kelliann Beavers [01:57]

That's wonderful. And I'm so glad to hear about it, and to learn about the way your organization works, and worked during that time. I imagine that was a challenging time for everyone, just being able to coordinate people that frequently is an incredible task.

Julie Murray [02:11]

Thank you for acknowledging that, because my team worked hard to make it look seamless. But you're right – when so many people were slowing down, it wasn't for a client, and so there was no revenue. It was just what we needed to do. We needed to step up, and bring in experts, and bring in the philanthropists, and do it every week. And nobody complained. Nobody said, "But wait. We're working 12-hour days in the middle of COVID." The team just wanted to deliver with excellence on both ends of the state.

Kelliann Beavers [02:45]

That's great. And so, talk to me a little bit about that, in terms of both ends of the state. Because, of course, I noticed at the event, there was representation from Northern Nevada. Does the Foundation operate in both ends of the state, or just have strong relationships throughout, or how does that work?

Julie Murray [02:59]

Yes, we do. We convene both groups in Las Vegas and Reno. So, whereas in Las Vegas – let's see. The MGM Resorts is hosting our 4th Quarter Corporate Funding Group in Reno. The last few sponsors have been Anthony Carano, whose family just took over Caesar's. He is a young man, young philanthropist. This was his first philanthropy public activity, and he hosted it last quarter.

And so, what you see us doing in Las Vegas is similar to Reno. We look at the most timely topics, bring in expert speakers, and bring the funders together. So that, as one group, they can get the data together.

Kelliann Beavers [03:42]

That's really interesting. So that's different than the nuts and bolts of what you do, as you described at the beginning, in terms of being a grant-making organization. You're also – I guess it's part of the advising role – but you're creating events where you're sort of like widely advising, not just one-on-one advising.

Julie Murray [04:02]

And you know what? You are so astute because you're absolutely right. Because there are two entities under the Foundation side, that is grant-making. Zappo's houses their funds with us, so when they want to make a grant anywhere in the country, they come to us. The Foundation Team does the research. The grant checks are cut. The Walker Furniture Family, Doctors Gard and Florence Jameson several people – we're like the "mini-community" foundation.

Kelliann Beavers [04:25]

Sure.

Julie Murray [04:27]

So that is the grant-making entity. On the company side, Moonridge Group, which is an LLC, that's the one where it's a consulting service. So, for example, there's a Family Foundation that just moved here from San Diego, and they said, "We do not know who to trust. Can you just get us ramped up here for the next year?"

Kelliann Beavers [04:46]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [04:49]

And so, it was my dream to do both. I modeled it after folks I met, gosh, maybe 20 years ago – The Paul Newman Foundation, and that they made the pizza and all those "Newman Own" products.

Kelliann Beavers [05:00]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [05:01]

And they did – that was the for-profit engine, and then they had the foundation engine, which was the grant-making, and I loved having both.

Kelliann Beavers [05:09]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [05:12]

So that's what it's modeled after.

Kelliann Beavers [05:14]

That's amazing. I definitely want to get through our standard questions. But I do have one more tangent question about what you do. Which is, you described that someone might come to you, especially if they didn't know who to trust or what kind of philanthropy to provide, etc., and that you are a good resource for that information. How did you build those relationships? Did it come through your career before having the Foundation, or through others that you trusted? That just sounds like, in and of itself, its own undertaking, right? I mean there's some folks who are just transparent and clearly, trustable, but there's a lot to that.

Julie Murray [05:59]

Do you know, it's been a lifelong career building. Never burn a bridge. Always keep humility. And, as with you, every day, every week, people will say, "Can we just tell you about our project?"

Kelliann Beavers [06:12]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [06:13]

And so, I never feel like I'm too busy to hear about the newest afterschool project, or the newest – so, there are seven of us, and all of us operate with that sense of care for the community.

Kelliann Beavers [06:23]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [06:25]

And we have various experts. We have one woman, who's a former teacher, who really stays up to date on education. We have two former Philanthropy Department MGM Resorts team members that know, given their 10 years there, so many of the nonprofits because they were part of the grant-making team, and we have experts in all areas. And individually, the seven of us work really hard to stay up to date on the nonprofit needs.

Kelliann Beavers [06:52]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [06:54]

And then through that Corporate Giving Report that you heard Brian Gordon from Applied Analysis conduct; we gain a lot of insight to what is being funded, where the gaps are – you all provide such great data about-

Kelliann Beavers [07:05]

Well, thanks for saying that. I'm glad to hear it.

Julie Murray [07:07]

Goodness, it's so true. And so, the compilation of all of that helps us to be able to stay up to date as best as possible so that we can accurately guide the funders.

Kelliann Beavers [07:20]

Sure. It's an enormous thing that you do. I love learning more about it and it's really interesting, so thanks for sharing all of that.

The next question is just, from your perspective, which groups did you believe, or even still believe, were hardest hit by the pandemic and the corresponding economic downturn?

Julie Murray [07:39]

I believe it is – as with you all – say this in so many of your reports. So I'm just going to be echoing what you all say. Healthcare and education. Because when you look at education, and the lack of access to wireless – however, I mean, isn't it amazing that the children suffered with the lack of connectivity?

Kelliann Beavers [08:00]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [08:02]

And the community rose to the occasion and made sure that every, single child in the state received a device, whether it was an iPad or something. So, so many people forget that. That in the midst of this crisis, every child was provided access to wireless and/or a device.

Kelliann Beavers [08:20]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [08:23]

And now that we're through that, and you look at other states, I don't know if there were many states who did that. However, education, as you know, took such a big hit, with the children now being behind, with the lack of access in the beginning to the internet to do their studies.

And then in healthcare, I would say it was mental health because of all of the challenges. Our youth struggled with the increase in suicide ideation, anxiety, depression. So, of the healthcare umbrella, I would say it was mental health that had the biggest impact, and then education, in every aspect imaginable.

Kelliann Beavers [09:03]

As far as Moonridge itself did – I guess "goals" isn't exactly the right word. I was going to say, did your goals change to accommodate different groups? But what I guess I'm asking is, prior to the pandemic, were there specific areas that you were focusing on funding, that maybe evolved due to the needs that arose during the pandemic or not?

Julie Murray [09:24]

Yes, that's a great question! Oh, you're good. It was. It was healthcare in education overall. And when the pandemic hit, we did focus on mental health – laser-focused on youth. We know that everybody was struggling, but we knew that our youth were having to stay at home if they had online access. Lost their connectivity. So we launched, in the middle of COVID, April 18th, 2020, we launched a youth mental health initiative with lots and lots of collaborative partners, and we really leaned into that. Because we saw, firsthand, so many friends who would say, "My daughter's neighbor just committed suicide."

Kelliann Beavers [10:10]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [10:11]

Actually, we've learned from Dr. Annie Weisman, it's "not committed suicide," it's "their suicide was completed." And because we've learned, over the last two years, the language is important.

Kelliann Beavers [10:21]

Uh-huh.

Julie Murray [10:24]

Or to say, "their suicide attempt was not completed." So, so many kids. I know that there was an NV Energy lineman – and Mark Orr, whose son, Anthony, an honor student, football player,

well-loved, committed suicide – who completed his suicide on August 8th, 2020. And he said – I stay in touch with him fairly often – and he said, "We didn't talk about mental health, mental wellness, 'how are you doing?' 'Do you need help?' then, especially a teenage male." And he said, "All of the work being done to remove the stigma, put resources online." And we have a campaign, that same campaign, where, when – particularly males have this one video game, and it's a motorcycle race game.

Kelliann Beavers [11:14]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [11:17]

Racing – the billboards of the video game have these slogans that tie into the campaign, that you or I might see if we're driving down the freeway.

Kelliann Beavers [11:26]

Oh, neat.

Julie Murray [11:27]

So, the bad thing is that youth mental health really struggled. The good news is, we as a state, rallied-

Kelliann Beavers [11:35]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [11:37]

-focused on it, brought funding, and brought a campaign. And we couldn't save Anthony Orr's life, but his father said, "Because you're helping to remove the stigma, in ways that the youth can understand and hear it. I believe that, out of that sadness, much good came about the way we rose as a state."

Kelliann Beavers [11:57]

Yeah. I've thought a lot about that because, of course, I know as well, have heard names mentioned of people I know, and it's just so grievous. And then just thinking about, you know, no one enjoyed having to mostly stay inside for a year to two. But if that was sort of your coming of age, or you're starting junior high or something, I just – those times are so formative. It's really hard to sort of fathom what the implications are socially, thus mentally.

Julie Murray [12:32]

And you know, to tag onto that. Then the Team Committee of this "Hope Means Nevada" initiative went up to the legislature virtually and got a legislative bill. Senate Bill 249 passed for three mental health days off. So when you and I were in school, you and I might have had strep throat, or flu, and we could take off and have it be approved. Our teams worked with Senator Dondero Loop and got free mental health days off that were approved. So if you or I were back in our high school days, and we just were feeling anxiety, depression, we could absolutely just let the school know, "I'm taking one of my three mental health days off."

Kelliann Beavers [13:10]

That is so amazing. I've never heard of that. And I remember, I had a friend who was deeply depressed in high school, and that is needed; to be able to claim it and not feel like you have to make up a story.

Julie Murray [13:23]

Yeah. And then on the other part of Senate Bill 249 was access to the Mental Help Emergency Line. So again, out of really awful times, I'm so proud of our city and of our state for really leaning in, making improvements, and becoming better because of the struggles.

Kelliann Beavers [13:44]

Yeah. Did you say the Teams went and-

Julie Murray [13:48]

Our team committee. So, "Hope Means Nevada" is the initiative.

Kelliann Beavers [13:53]

Oh.

Julie Murray [13:54]

And Mary Ann Mele, a partner from R&R Partners, and I co-chair it. And the first thing we did is, we were launching it on April 18th, 2020 – was to form a team committee. Because we knew that – she and I are the same age – and we knew if we were to say to the teens, "It's okay to not be okay," "It's okay to ask for help," they would look at us like, "Okay, ma'am." But if our teen committee led the messaging, did it through social media, did it to – like I just shared that there's that video game, that the motorcycles – and when the motorcycle does this big jump over something, there's some of the messaging right there.

Kelliann Beavers [14:27]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [14:29]

We knew we had to have young people connecting with other young people.

Kelliann Beavers [14:32]

That is amazing. It's really powerful. Can you discuss if there were collaborative efforts that you observed across nonprofit organizations or government agencies? Of course, asking you this question is like huge compared to asking other people this question because it is literally what you observed. But I'd love to hear anything that stood out to you.

Julie Murray [14:55]

You know, one that's my favorite, and there are so many favorites. So I'll tell you that you and I could talk for hours. My favorite, favorite, of all the favorites was food insecurity because, as you know, I co-founded that. And then Brian Burton was the next CEO. He and I stayed in touch during COVID, and the need was so overwhelming.

Kelliann Beavers [15:14]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [15:16]

And they had so many sites out in the community. So if I was a mom and I had kids, or I had my mom living with me, or my elderly father, during COVID, you couldn't get out to a Three Square site. And they were all over; they were at schools; they were at churches. But due to COVID – like my mom is so breathing-compromised. So many people couldn't get out. So this community rally, with so many collaborative partners – I think there are close to 100 – and launched “Delivering With Dignity,” which put the restaurant workers back to work. It paid the restaurants a small amount per meal so that they could keep their employees going. Through volunteerism, picked up beautiful restaurant meals from the restaurants, and delivered them to the homes of impoverished individuals, who could not leave in order to get the Three Square food.

So it was a triple-great thing. Because, as you know, you couldn't volunteer during COVID. This, you stayed in your car, you picked up the meals from the restaurant, you drove it. You had, through technology, you could say, "Okay, my 10 stops are all in the zip code 89117," and you just drove. And the sites had been pre-approved by nonprofit partners. So, Allie from foster care, – grandparents raising grandchildren; compromised, couldn't get out. She would say, "Here are the 64 families that need the food." And so, it was all of this collaboration.

So the good thing in that is, restaurant workers kept their jobs. Restaurants kept their doors opened. People who needed connection got to volunteer. And the best benefit was, the low-income people, who couldn't get out due to COVID, received food. And the community rallied in such a way that – it still is going on today. It was just going to be a COVID entity, but because the need keeps dragging on was so much, it probably will run for another year, until we're fully clear of COVID and other factors. So that was – you know, there were many, many that rose through a collaboration of funders and public-private partnerships. That one was my favorite.

Kelliann Beavers [17:48]

I was saying that it is wonderful that it's been able to continue on some, and it's been really neat to hear about any efforts like that that happened due to the crisis and the peak of the need. But then has sort of been maintained because some means were there that just were not quite so at the forefront.

Julie Murray [18:22]

And so that one, "Delivering With Dignity" is still going, and will probably go on for another year or two. The other one, "Hope Means Nevada," the youth mental health, that one may go on forever. Because with food security, you can address it. Mental health, I think that that's something that youth may always struggle with. So that one probably will carry on for many, many years to come, and be that humble collaborative person, that entity. And in between – that one also has about 100 collaborative partners. UNLV is a big one, through Dr. Shawn Gerstenberger, the med school. So many entities on the campus are participating in that one.

Kelliann Beavers [19:03]

Yeah, that's wonderful. What do you wish, if anything, that different levels of government would have done or could be doing differently now, in response to the pandemic or the downturn following the pandemic?

Julie Murray [19:18]

I actually don't have any words of advice about what they should be doing differently. Because when they got the ARPA funds, we were allowed to be a central place to gather the funders, and have experts from – that were leading the ARPA funds-

Kelliann Beavers [19:38]

Wow!

Julie Murray [19:41]

-speak to the funders in one room two times. So the first time they said, to a room packed of 80 funders, "Here's what we believe we'll be doing with the six billion – this, this, this, and this." And then they came back, another three months later and said, "Yes, we are doing A, B, and C, not D, E, and F." So that way, the funders could see what the government, the ARPA funds, the OAG funds would do. And they could either leverage their dollars and go all-in to support one. Or if they saw, 'Oh, well, affordable housing and homelessness is getting a big chunk, but this isn't,' they could make decisions.

So we didn't necessarily work with anyone from the governor's office. It was their state grant office who had really timely information. And so because of that, we were able to have funders be so strategic, given all of that windfall of money that so many received.

Kelliann Beavers [20:44]

Yeah. That answers a question that I didn't realize I quietly had in my mind earlier, and then made up an answer for that is maybe wrong. Which is, I wondered how or if you work with government agencies. Of course, there are some grants that are funneled through government agencies, some of which are federally funded or something that would be very different than necessarily a foundation-funded established grant. But the truth is, I don't really know a lot about it, and how that would work. So it's really wonderful to hear that that dialog is there so that your philanthropy community can identify where there are gaps in care for the community, and like you said, where they might want to strengthen an effort.

Julie Murray [21:30]

Yes. And what's interesting is, it was difficult to find just the right place. So it took a lot to understand where will the six billion go? By when? What are the steps? And you know, I think the fact that we were really persistent – we were able to get to the right person who could deliver timely information. And now, moving forward, I think a big, big, big challenge for our community is that, as you know, there are so many nonprofits that receive windfall amounts of money. Some spent it wisely; others were spending it just on anything to use it by year's end.

Kelliann Beavers [22:06]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [22:07]

I know that some of the funds are due to be spent by the end of this year.

Kelliann Beavers [22:10]

Mm-hmm.

Julie Murray [22:13]

Others are a few years – and so, what will be that "cliff" that will – some may go over when their windfall funds are done.

Kelliann Beavers [22:20]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [22:22]

So it's going to be interesting to see. But for now, you know, they're safe. They have the funding. But it was windfall, and I don't think they'll see that again.

Kelliann Beavers [22:32]

Yeah. It definitely was an exceptional moment. And that need to spend it by a certain date, I know, was intense for many folks.

Well, I want to honor your time. This has been so meaningful. I have learned so much from you, and I'm grateful to be connected with you as well. You are an incredible human being; so thank you for all of the work that you do.

Julie Murray [22:50]

Well, right back at you. And please, any time you want to come to any of our quarterly meetings. You saw the corporate funding report. The next gathering of the philanthropists will be at Jazmine's in the Bellagio, and it is December 7th, which is a Wednesday. And, oh, my gosh, this topic is going to be so good. Let me just make sure I've got the date right. December – yes. It's December 7th, which is a Wednesday. It is Jyoti Chopra, the Chief Sustainability Officer for MGM Resorts, is going to be talking about sustainability, metrics, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; why it's good for all of our funders in the state-

Kelliann Beavers [23:33]

Oh, neat. You know, I work for a start-up part-time, or I have, over time. And periodically, her investors have asked us to connect our goals to those sustainable development goals, and it will be interesting to learn more about that. I'll definitely come.

Julie Murray [23:51]

Yeah. Please email me, and then I'll – once your schedule's cleared. And I'll have Adriana then add you to the calendar notice. What you'll be so surprised \ is that we have polled the funders – The Family Foundations and the corporate funders a number of times in the past. Never have there been enough votes to have a speaker speak solely about the United Nations Sustainable Development's goals.

Kelliann Beavers [24:12]

Wow.

Julie Murray [24:13]

And so I just think that we are young in our philanthropy in this state. Places like Texas and New York, they've been doing it for generations.

Kelliann Beavers [24:21]

Yeah, it's different.

Julie Murray [24:23]

And they said, "No, no, we don't think we need to know about that."

Kelliann Beavers [24:26]

Yeah.

Julie Murray [24:28]

So, sliding it in under metrics, which everybody cares about.

Kelliann Beavers [24:31]

Of course.

Julie Murray [24:33]

So I'm excited that you'll come. So I'll have Adri add you to the calendar.

Kelliann Beavers [24:36]

Okay. Well, thank you again so much for all of this. This is wonderful. And I hope to continue to stay in touch with you over time.

Julie Murray [24:42]

Thank you for your great work and have a great rest of your week.

Kelliann Beavers [24:46]

Thanks a lot, and you too, Julie.

Julie Murray [24:47]

Okay. Bye-bye.

Kelliann Beavers [24:48]

Bye.

End of audio: 24:53