The Difference - Doug Croft - All-America City Award

**SPEAKERS**

Doug Croft, Jay Werth

**Announcer** 00:00

This is "The Difference". A podcast for nonprofit fundraising in a for profit world, presented by Convergent Nonprofit Solutions, a leader in nonprofit fundraising, Convergent's professionals can help your nonprofit secure sustainable funding now and for the future.

**Jay Werth** 00:18

Glad to have you with us today. We have a special guest. We're both members of Convergent Nonprofit Solutions. Every once in a while, we go off the fundraising track and we interview a fellow Convergent Nonprofit team member who's involved in some interesting facet of community development or nonprofit organization involvement. And Doug has volunteered for quite a while with the All-America City So Doug, give us a little bit of background about Doug Croft and how you got involved in the All-America City Program.

**Doug Croft** 00:54

I had heard of the program in my career as a Chamber of Commerce executive, and then at a point, you know, maybe 15 or so years ago, in a community where I was a chamber exec, the mayor at the time, brought it up and something that we wanted to consider. We did pursue that, and had a good experience the first time. Didn't win, but did it again a few years later, and the community I was in was designated All-America City. I was kind of fortunate. The next year, the organizers called and asked me to be a volunteer with them, and I think it's been a decade or so now, I've thoroughly enjoyed it, and it's one of my favorite like you and probably most of our listeners, we serve on different boards in our communities and around but this has become my favorite over over, all that time.

**Jay Werth** 01:47

So what city were you in that was designated in All-America City?

**Doug Croft** 01:52

I was in Thomasville, North Carolina.

**Jay Werth** 01:54

Okay, and have you worked in a variety of sizes of cities, or is there a typical population range?

**Doug Croft** 02:03

In my career, I've worked in a couple different chambers, in three different cities, and this programs, it's the full wide variety. And in fact, they use the term All-America City, but quite frankly, you can be a county, you can be a neighborhood, you can be a region. They still use that title of All-America City, but it doesn't have to be specifically a geographic city government.

**Jay Werth** 02:27

How many applicants are typically entered in a given year? Now that you've had 10 or more years of experience.

**Doug Croft** 02:34

That's the most closely held secret I've ever heard. They award 10 a year. That's the bottom line. And it's been that way since its inception, believe it or not. And I think it was 1949, always done 10 a year. Nobody knows. And I even I don't know how many people apply, and it varies based upon the economy and how things are going and energy and focus they typically identify of the however many applicants, about 20, sometimes 20 to 25 are named finalists from the application process out are invited to the annual event where those 10 are selected out of that 20.

**Jay Werth** 03:19

And who does the judging?

**Doug Croft** 03:21

A team of judges, about generally, 10 to 12. They are a cross section. It has been my experience of you'll see some experienced city managers. You'll see some you may see a police chief from somewhere. You may see Chamber of Commerce executives. You may see some corporate philanthropy kind of organizations, some members from the board. The organization that does this, just to use their proper name, is called All-America City, but their organization is called National Civic League, so there may be a few people from their board of directors as well.

**Jay Werth** 03:58

Let's get into the nuts and bolts of this in terms of what are the key components to earn the award?

**Doug Croft** 04:04

What I've really enjoyed about this is just being there at that event and hearing these stories from communities and the great projects that they do. So it's not always talked about, but this is really about community projects of civic engagement, cross sector collaboration. So to put that in my words, what to me, seems to make a difference is it's not necessarily the mayor who goes, Oh, we're the greatest city, exuberant mayor. We all think that about our communities, but these are communities who acknowledge that as good as we are. We have a challenge in this area, or maybe we had a challenge in this other area, and we needed to address it. But to me, the key here is that it wasn't addressed just by City Hall writing a check and waving a magic wand. It is citizen engagement. It might be the business could. Community that helps, and the hospital and civic clubs and other not for profit organizations that together the community said we're going to tackle this project, this this situation in our community. And yes, City Hall is a part of it as well, but that's the cross sector collaboration, that's the civic engagement. They're talking about is that it doesn't have to involve every citizen, but it's broader than just a City Hall, a City Manager, a Mayor fixing a problem on their own.

**Jay Werth** 05:32

Can you give us an example of one or two of those innovative, interesting civic engagement initiatives? It could be the one that you used in your situation.

**Doug Croft** 05:43

When a community applies, they submit three projects sort of over the last five or so years. And so I see and hear literally, and have seen and heard literally hundreds and hundreds of different projects, and they're all very powerful. And so the first one I mentioned there was a community in South Carolina who, in recent years, like communities with so many communities, wanted to address DEI- diversity, equity and inclusion, but they took a bit of a unique approach to it. While, yes, that's about gender and sexual orientation and et cetera, et cetera, ethnicity, they also included a component about neurodiversity. Said, You know what? We have a lot of differences in our population. Neurodiversity is one of them. And I'm shortening this to say even one of their components was through, actually another Chamber of Commerce that did a DEI Program, and they made sure they included a focus on hiring neurodivergent individuals for jobs that they could perform. Wow, I'll share one other quickly. And all communities face this where young people and in homes that where there may be poverty, they're hungry, they get fed at school sometimes and may not have toiletries, and some citizens collectively, sort of through a church, but couldn't connect the church and the school system. Those had to be separate, but raised resources through a variety of events that was able to were able to put into a pool the school administrators and others could use to help kids get toiletries. And this was a unique situation. This particular community was at the corner of three governmental counties. So if you're in this school district, your best friend may be a mile away in another county and another mile away in a third County, and you may have slept on their couch that night, or your other friend's couch that night. Well, the school bus can't come pick you up, because it's across the county line. Through this kind of a program, I believe it was called Project Divine Interruption, they were able to put funds together to put gas in somebody's car to go get that kid, to get them to school.

**Jay Werth** 07:53

Are organizations that are submitting, that are representing these cities are they asked to demonstrate the tangible results and measurable impacts or outcomes. We talk about that a lot in Convergent when we're managing fundraising campaigns that we're looking for, what we call Outcomes instead of Outputs. Output is the activity. Outcome is the result. What changed? What improved?

**Doug Croft** 08:20

That absolutely is the case, and I have often felt even as I sit and watch these communities come to the event, do presentations, they'll tell their story of we did this and we did that, but if they don't document it and tell that story with with measurable outcomes, it's not all hard business facts, but that helps, but, but you have to have some results, and maybe it's ongoing. You've not waved the magic wand by doing this project and it stopped. This may go on for 10 years or forever. Can't have done this project last year and don't have any results yet. It's probably a project you've done over the last four or five years, three to four years, and you're beginning to see some results, but in that storytelling, the winners often are there who are who literally bring constituents who say, Yes, I'm one of those kids that was in that program, or I'm a neurodivergent person who got a job at this business when no one else would hire me. Not only do you have the need to have some data, some reflection of how those outcomes have been achieved, but a real human story to validate it, looking you in the eye, telling you that.

**Jay Werth** 09:33

You spoke about two projects, neurodivergency and The other one was DEI. Is there any trend or common theme with the presentations that certain topics seem to come up time and time again?

**Doug Croft** 09:50

There absolutely are, and sometimes I'll even see trends, and I'm sort of smiling as I think back, and I'm, you know, a decade ago. Community would, we're stuck? Would build a skate park? Hey, it got our kids off the street, and they were all in skateboarding. And I remember going to an All-America City Conference, and four communities there had built skate parks, so that that was a trend at the time. So you definitely see trends and and things evolve. I'll certainly tell you, there's, there's not rules on that. There's not you have to have this or you have to have that. However, there's no doubt that youth programs make a difference. I look at the eyes of jury members, and, you know, you watch a 10 minute presentation and you see a youth look at them and say, I was in this program, and I got diverted because of this great impact of this program. It's, as I said, it's a real story. It's personal. So youth always telling their story are that helps to to win. Everybody's a winner by being there and being selected. They do, I will say, have a different theme each year. Those themes are not always required. I recall a year that that my community went and there was a military related veterans theme. You're not required to have a project related to their theme, but they use these themes just to help stimulate thought.

**Jay Werth** 11:14

Well, tell us a little bit more about how a city or an entity doesn't necessarily have to be a city. How do they get to the conference?

**Doug Croft** 11:21

And this process is sort of a first half of the year process. They're in the process right now of applications. So there's a deadline. That's February 27th. Some communities will have sent in what, you know, a letter of intent. That's certainly not required. So don't let that stop you if you haven't sent that in. I have heard that they had a record number of letters of intent this year. So that's a good sign. February 27th is the application deadline. But in March, they will announce the finalists. Once they announce those, you'll have from late March to the event, which is June 27th in Denver, Colorado I will add. During those couple of months for your team to to make their plan, you will go and do a 10-minute presentation, and you'll do that with the jury. You'll have time, you know, two months to plan that, write those out. That's the process, sort of from now through late June, they'll announce at the conference who those winners are. So you you're awarded, sort of there. But also, you know, within a month or so afterwards, if you do a a local celebration to celebrate your your victory in your community, a designated person from the organization will come and be there with you, and could present the plaque in front of your citizens and and you can have a local celebration.

**Jay Werth** 12:46

For some of our clients, if their City or geographic region is under consideration, they may have part and parcel in helping with that application, right? I mean, we work with a variety of types of organizations, and who might those types be?

**Doug Croft** 13:02

That's been my experience is, yes, generally, there's one person, maybe at City Hall or the Chamber of Commerce, who handles the data part. You know that application has data and information about the community, but those projects are are told by the players involved. So you're right. That could be the Chamber of Commerce, that could be the Civic Club, the Rotary Club, organization that did some project. It could be a YMCA. Those are all good examples, but you'll see any organization is going to have that story to tell. If you've been involved in in a project, you have one that you've been involved with, and potentially your community has had another one or two. You're our prime. This is the time we'll prepare and do it next year. You're, you know, within a within a window of time, if you've got two or three projects that in your community you think are worthy of sharing that story, this is the time.

**Jay Werth** 13:58

It is. February 27th is the deadline for applications to be sent to the National Civic League. That is the sponsoring organization. I have the website here in view, and it's very easy, NationalCivicLeague.org, that's one word, NationalCivicLeague.org, Doug, you are an enthusiastic ambassador for this program.

**Doug Croft** 14:29

Well, thank you. And let me tell you my role real quickly. One is I occasionally, at this time of the year, I was asked to be a mentor for a community so the team, the the staff team, it's National Civic League. When they have folks they know are applying, they may say, will you mentor these folks? Help advise them on their on their application, or help look at which projects may be worthy of submission. And at the actual event, when the communities are there, there's a big conference room. And of course, people get to see and watch these other two. Communities do their presentations. One of my roles is, is actually managing that room, so helping teams get in and out and up on stage. And my favorite part of it is everybody gets to rehearse. So you get a you get to go in one day and do a little rehearsal on the real stage that you do it on. And I get to watch all those and not only will I make sure they kind of get their marks and their timing, but often will have a few minutes where I get to give them tips. They don't really necessarily solicit that, but I end up mentoring 20 communities for a few minutes and say, Oh, the way you presented that. Or maybe if you turn the sign this way, or you need to emphasize those words, can help really flesh out their presentation, make it more powerful. You're right. I'm enthusiastic about that because I really enjoy that. When we are leaving that event, we'll hear some version of this statement, which is, "wow, this is what's right about America." It's like, that's a cliche. Almost nobody writes it down, but it some version of that. You know, in today's world, there's challenges, there's all our news feeds are full of concerns and problems andyet you you go there and you go, Oh, wait, wait, wait, wait, I just saw 20 communities present three projects each, and they're incredible. They're affecting citizens, lives and and improving their community, I walk away restored.

**Jay Werth** 16:25

What a good way to wrap up. Our highlight today is talking to Doug Croft, and we're highlighting his involvement in the All-America City Award, and just one way that members of the Convergent Nonprofit team plug into community engagement. Thanks for listening. And if you would like to know more about resources available from Convergent Nonprofit Solutions to help your fundraising efforts, please visit our website, convergentnonprofit.com I'm Jay Werth. Thanks for listening and for making a difference in your corner of the world.