

Signal Boost Transcript

Episode: 1 - Leaning into the Lessons

Guests: Issaq Ahmed
Sureya Ibrahim

SARAH

Hello

Welcome to SIGNAL BOOST, a podcast brought to you by the Centre for Connected Communities and Ontario Trillium Foundation.

The Centre for Connected Communities is a community development strategy organization that supports people, organizations and institutions to unlock the potential of connected communities everywhere!

Communities are the building blocks of cities. But communities can't exist without people. In each episode of SIGNAL BOOST, you'll hear from people on the ground about how grassroots solutions are leading local change.

On this episode, Issaq Ahmed and Sureya Ibrahim, engaged grassroots leaders in Toronto, met digitally to talk about how their grassroots work has changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they hope to move forward

ISSAQ

My name is Issaq. The sort of work that I do is within my direct community in the Scarborough area at Lawrence and Susan street, Orton Park Area. I try to coordinate events or collaborate with other organizations and partners to bring resources and opportunities that would really help out to improve our well being.

SUREYA

My name is Sureya. Work and live in Regent Park. The type of work that I do for the grassroots is being creative and stepping in and when there is a need, if it is Neighborhood Association, or community benefits, anything that needs immediate attention. So to respond to or whatever community needs. I'll be there to help and facilitate and make it happen.

ISSAQ

Hey Sureya, How's everything?

SUREYA Good. How are you?

ISSAQ Good, I'm good. *Alhamdulillah*. How is *Ramadan* going for you?

SUREYA I just came running in. I didn't help cleanup. We're doing *Iftar*, We were packing and I ran from them.

ISSAQ Oh yeah? So is that part of your, grassroots work you usually do?

SUREYA This is another initiative that uh pop-up through...Masjid, they do every year a meal--*Iftar*. So we met once and trying to figure out how we do it and so on and didn't happen. This is another ad-hoc committee that was established. So we got some money to do the *Iftar* and also we created a GoFund Me. And And people are also stepping out to take any days that are available and provide cooked meal as well.

ISSAQ What sort of grassroots work do you usually do?

SUREYA A lot of grassroots initiative that I'm a part of it in Regent Park. We met throughout the year but the major is organizing Eid prayer. We've been doing it for a couple of years. We were lucky enough to have it outside. We were talking about that this morning, we will have a zoom meeting or virtual *Khutbah*--we'll see.

ISSAQ What sort of things did you have to change of your daily lifestyle once the pandemic occurred?

SUREYA It was really difficult for me. I'm a people person I need to see people I need to come out. The first week, I was going to work, like, and finally, a lot of awareness came out all of the fear mongering was going on. I wasn't... I wasn't accepting it. For me it was really hard. The whole week I was, like, wake up and the same time this happened to work. And I was doing my zoom meeting and everything in my, in the center even though the center was close. And then a few of my friends, reach out to me asking Sureya what do you need? What sort of the community members need help. And the thing get was worse. Like it was very serious. And we've been changing the amount of people are dying and so on. And but at the same time, like, there is people need help in the community. So who rely on precarious jobs in and honorarium all of that and everything

was cutting down. So, my friend, and he transferring the money and I was buying grocery gift cards and delivering to them.

And finally, and I was sharing this with my boss. You are putting yourself on risk, you shouldn't do this. You didn't have contact --all of this. Okay, this is the last time I'm doing today the last piece. So, I stopped doing that then the government stepped in. And so I was meeting in zoom, the staff members, all of the program that we were running it was on hold. Yeah, it just, it was very hard for me to accept it. Like, all of a sudden I get anxiety, why you're home. You're not sick, Usually I only stay home when I'm sick. This is unusual for me sitting and checking on the community members on the phone. And not everybody has that and checking in about mental health well being. And what is the practical tips that they could use. And so yeah, just..Then, the sewing group they start making mask. And all of a sudden busy with a mask of 300 mask or 500 --the huge demand for mask and they're so busy and making themselves and hundred percent of the proceeds from the mask was going to the lady making the mask. Finding a way through challenge opportunities as well. This was a huge opportunity for them.

ISSAQ

It's tough for us to really, you know, continue to do the same work that we were doing, because it's a completely different lifestyle. You can't physically be with the people that we're serving now, so that also kind of really link to another question that I had was, you know, has this experience really forced you to be more creative with your work, and from your answer, definitely has.

SUREYA

Here was Muslim Welfare Canada who were doing a meal but because of COVID-19 they start a meal for the seniors. Sunday meal but in addition to that, they start on Wednesdays. So I start delivering. And also for me this is excuse to come out of the house and checking on them on how they've been doing as well, delivering to them fresh meal, since then the meal is continuing every Wednesday.

ISSAQ

Yeah, and usually our seniors are forgotten. You know, you're still acting that you're still giving back, you're still helping out in the community, now it's just maybe slightly different from what you've been doing and it's because of the circumstances.

SUREYA

I think we will be like this for for a long, long, long time. I think it also will defeat the purpose locked down and if you go back to the way of life. So, take what we learn from this and integrate it the way forward as well. It will serve a purpose, having interaction outside, and you build the relationship new relationship and foster the relationship that you have. But, and also the technology has a purpose. So let's not forget the people who are not in tech, especially the seniors, they don't have internet or laptop, all of that

ISSAQ

Good point that you made, you know, once this thing is over and if we leave and we go back to certain ways that we've been going it's as if we've never really have took in you know the gratitude, from this, like, This experience has made imagine it's made all of us so much more grateful for us being freely going out and freely, you know, being in public spaces with so many, so many people. For example, if you go to work or something. What are your thoughts on that and how will this experience really adjust the work that you do once this thing is done now?

SUREYA

Let's not force the technology on the people's throats. Giving options will help that people are being included. We need to be thinking about who we're going to be leaving behind when we go and do stuff, do the community work and stuff. We will be having workshops this Friday of our Healing Center. We had one session, then COVID-19 came in. When we go back, we need that option of providing and virtually, they need to come physically, yes, but it won't be the same. They will be screening all of that, we need to respect that. But at the same time, we need to be mindful of balancing both as well.

ISSAQ

Now moving forward like. Now, there has to be that option. You're right it's a completely different experience when you're in front of somebody compared to when you're talking to somebody virtually. It's as if you can feel the, the presence of someone when they're right in front of you and that's not something that you can get. With you and the grassroots work that you do, how do you see grassroots work, changing now?

SUREYA

Hard to build new relationship to the grassroots groups you try to engage like incentives that you give, honoraria, foods. Like that's been taken away like like how do you do that, how do you advocate in the city. The way we had in the past was incentivizing people and honoring their time and

give them honoraria. All of that is not existing now. Yeah, it just, it just feels weird. Yes, you could you could take online training, you could help the community members get set off the skills that they need. At the same time, you need to have that face to face interaction to provide that support system for grieving, or whatever that they are going through. The online I feel is not doing justice.

ISSAQ

I feel like and, you know, I hope that the city you know the province and even federal government, they began kind of like a movement towards having much more healthier lifestyles and really putting emphasis on the well being, maybe they might have more commercials or things on going to the doctor's maybe every once every two months, maybe they might even suggest subsidies for gym passes.

SUREYA

Also encourage for people to walk. Every night we have a group of us we go for a walk for one hour. We started about four months ago, when we lost a young person from the gun violence people were scared to walk, it does completely different on your mental health, and also your health, your circulation, and so on. And they do that otherwise we're going to pay for that later.

ISSAQ

And I think that a much more investment should be made in certain small things like this because it can make the biggest difference in our communities and when I say investment I mean like a serious, even with funding because it takes a lot of energy for even grassroots leaders to put these things together because essentially grasses work is volunteer work, you know, and so outside of your nine to five job outside of your family. Now you have this, and this, and it's good that we still do this work too, but like, imagine how much energy we have left no on the things that are really really important to us like imagine having to balance your family, or like your work, or like your, your grassroots work so it can be really really difficult and really taxing, you know on this long term, who knows, but yeah definitely I do, I definitely do agree with you.

SUREYA

We just need to be mindful of the community that is vulnerable, let's not forget those individuals, reaching out to them and checking on them, as well as we move on, otherwise they will be, depression will kick in and the young people they don't have a job, usually it's time that they take the job, those opportunities are not there. There is a lot of young people that

will be also been released from the jail, so they need opportunities as well. And they're going back to the community as well. So, we are mindful of those young people who need support. Not always the family have that skill set to support them emotionally, as well. So yeah, I'm figuring that out as well.

ISSAQ

Thank you This was pretty fun. I appreciate the opportunity, Sureya. I'm glad that we're able to have a nice, nice conversation.

SUREYA

Thank you for this

SARAH

This has been SIGNAL BOOST, amplifying the voices of community builders on the ground and at the grassroots. SIGNAL BOOST is brought to you by the Centre for Connected Communities and Ontario Trillium Foundation.

Today's guests were Issaq Ahmed and Sureya Ibrahim, deeply engaged grassroots leaders in Toronto

Signal Boost is written and produced by Sarah Luca. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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