

LiveWell Interview, South LA Cafe

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Joe Ward-Wallace, Celia Ward-Wallace

C Celia Ward-Wallace 00:02

Put down roots this creative space let's create safety. Let's focus on the local people. Let's focus on the black and brown people focus on our history, our heritage, our culture, and also allow those people to create the next wave of culture. What does south central South LA look like to those people now?

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:24

Hi everyone. Welcome back to live well podcast with me your host Dr. Wendy Slusser. Today we have not one but two incredible guests on the podcast Joe and cilia Ward Wallace. These two are power Duo's as a couple as business owners, entrepreneurs, activists and now baristas at South LA cafe. They founded South LA cafe in their own backyard based on coffee, community and connection with deep faith and roots in community advocacy. They paved the path for Cultural Preservation, anti gentrification and food access and the South Central Community, cilia, a social enterprise consultant and UCLA alum and Joe a retired fireman took the strengths from their past careers and translated them to lead the cafe. But we minor detail. They founded the cafe just before the pandemic hit. And so building on their strengths, they quickly pivoted to be a neighborhood hub for a grocery sponsorship program COVID 19 vaccine rollout, and through resilience and deep community roots, they can provide jobs as the contractor for hospitality. At the nearby natural history museum, you'll hear the story of the cafe's creation and the winding roads that both cilia and Joe took to end up at this special corner in South Central LA. Enjoy. Welcome Joe and cilia Ward Wallace to our UCLA live well podcast, we are super excited to have you here. And I want to start with a quote that you offered up in your alumni, UCLA newsletter interview that I thought would be a great way to kick off this interview, which is when opportunity meets preparation, the big great things come to you. And so before we get into the how I want to know the why why did you embark on this creative and daring initiative South LA cafe,

J Joe Ward-Wallace 02:40

I can say you got to be a little crazy. Honestly, that's the big thing. But our why? This community for me you know, this is where I've been all my life. I've lived in South Central but as you know the world knows are starting to know is that it's not that many things like this in our community where it's walking distance. And it should be should be able to walk your dog and go over to a coffee shop that you feel safe in and that you feel comfortable. And then you feel welcome. And it just wasn't here in my community and one one day that close to retiring, because we've been thinking about a coffee shop for what 15 years. And so I just said it's time it's time to do and we and I how it started was we I got off on the wrong off ramp coming home one day, and I saw this space. I guess it had been there awhile, but I saw this face and it was it was ugly. And but you know what I said we could put a coffee shop right there. And so I started the whole process of you know, negotiation, all that stuff. So you got involved.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 03:55

That's where my why sort of intersected with Joe's why. And so, you know, I can't say that I know exactly what my why is. But I do know that I'm a child of community organizers of revolutionaries who, you know, sort of instilled in me from a very, very early age, the importance of social justice work and advocacy and speaking up against you know, injustice and you know, really breaking breaking new ground and, you know, trying to shift institutions and structures that were oppressive to people, you know, primarily through race class gender lens. And so that's been what I've always been focused on since I was little it's what I studied in college at UCLA. It's what I studied in law school at the people's college of law. It's what I focused on when I built our coaching and consulting firm the word Wallace group was battered. Yeah, there's no there's been a pattern. And then we just never had brick and mortar. And so one of the really cool things that I think that I realized when I walked in to see the space that Joe had identified was this is not just a community, this is not just a coffee shop, this is a community center. And, you know, we have a tagline is coffee community connection, and we say, you know, coffee brings the community connection is what they receive, right? And we knew that, you know, you can knock on people's door all day long, and try and convert them into being a part of social change, you know, but you know, the, the conversion rate is lower than it is if you figure out what it is that they want, create a magnetic force to bring them to you. And then once they're, you know, say, Hey, tell us about yourself, what's going on with you. Okay, that's interesting. Here, we have some resources, we have some community partners, we have some events coming on. And so the coffee shop became an activation center that we could do community organizing through and we leveraged people's caffeine addiction as the primary product to get them there.

J Joe Ward-Wallace 06:14

We wanted to organize the community and bring us together. So there's our why.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:19

So when you got off that wrong exit ramp and saw that corner, why that corner? Why did that speak to you? Right?



J

Joe Ward-Wallace 06:26

It's a busy little spot in our area, unfortunately, because there's Popeyes and the nail shop, and you know, things that people go to donut shop, and you know, laundrymat, all those kinds of things. And people are in from my block from my community from my street, go in there. And I said, Well, you know what, they should be going in there for a nice comfortable sit down coffee shop, too. So that's what you know, all that was going through my mind.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:57

What you're describing sounds a lot like a typical food desert in America. As you reflect on your community, and particularly the street, that South LA Cafe resides on. I'm sure you've thought a lot about this term. And what it means you are actively working to provide a solution to that to increase consumer options, education and food choices. Please tell us a little bit more about this.

J

Joe Ward-Wallace 07:26

When I started understanding what a food desert was really when our Ralph's here first left, they were going to turn it into a CVS and I was like, Wait a second, then I started thinking about where's the next market? And then I realize, wait a minute, there's really not much of a of choices in my community.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 07:51

So what's it like to live in a food desert?

C

Celia Ward-Wallace 07:54

Put yourself in a position where, you know, you're, you're a little lower income, you have less resources? And now with \$20, where do you go to get food? Well, and fast, right? So you're going to go to whatever's nearby, whatever's convenient. But if you literally have no grocery stores nearby to get to, if your public transit dependent, and you also have no healthy fast food, or you know, restaurants in your community, you're going to eat what you can. And you're also going to when you do shop, you're going to get things that are on a budget, right? So you're going to end up getting the things that have higher, you know, saturated fat and sodium and all the things and so as a result, you end up having communities where we say, food deserts, it's a desert, there's nowhere to go, even if you wanted to, there's nowhere to go.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 08:48

I remember you told me in one of your interviews that the interviewee didn't know what a food desert was.



Celia Ward-Wallace 08:54

C Celia Ward-Wallace 08:54

We were nominated during the pandemic to go on the Ellen show because of our work. That's called the South LA grocery giveaway that was born out of the pandemic we lovingly put together primarily all fresh produce bags that weigh over 35 pounds that and based on our statistics, over five people are able to eat for the week off of each bag. So over 1000 people are impacted by this food every week. All of that to say for those listening in, and this is no slide on Ellen but it's just the truth. It she says in preparation for the segment with you guys. My producers were talking to me about you were going to share about food deserts and I realized I didn't know what a food desert was. And so we explained it but what I realized from that is like, oh my goodness, a felon who lives in Los Angeles who is very progressive doesn't know what a food desert is. What are the chances that those you know 100 million people that watch your show also don't know what a food desert is? And why is that right? And we're talking about it every day. It's part of our daily living. Yet there's people who We have in our own city that have no idea.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 10:01

So what are the roots to why your community has evolved into a food desert.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 10:07

So you know, if we look at the history of South Central, go way back 100 years, it's white families everywhere. This is a white community in the 70s, you have an uptick in the job market in the factories, and you start having a migration of black people coming in the 60s and 70s, to Los Angeles and other places where there's opportunities for jobs. And as a result, when they start moving in, the white people move out, right, and there's the concept of white flight. And then you have the influx of crack cocaine that got planted into South Central. And then as a, as a result of that, the government thinks we got to crack down on that. So let's start criminalizing it and imprisoning everybody. And we know with the, with that system, how, you know, it's not equal towards people of color. And so all of this is to say, then this becomes an undesirable community where nobody wants to invest in. And then now you have the full circle moment with the housing market going crazy. And you know, people not being able to live in homes on the west side, and they start to migrate to where it's more affordable. And yet, they come in the community, and they take a home that maybe could sell for \$400,000. And within two years, we have prices here that are now 800 \$900,000, for homes, where black and brown working class people cannot afford to live here anymore. And there's a recolonization, essentially, of south central from people coming in, and guess what's going to happen? I bet you we're gonna get some grocery stores, and we will no longer have a food desert here in South LA, but it will be somewhere else, because people have to go and live somewhere.

J Joe Ward-Wallace 11:55

Wow, I was sitting here listening, you say that. And I'm going, there's a there's a Trader Joe's coming, I guess, the next 10 years. Not because they want to service a food desert, but because the food desert community is changing.



D Dr. Wendy Slusser 12:11

Wow. One of your missions is cultural preservation and cultural creation. So how are you integrating that into this prophecy of what you think is going to happen to your community?

J Joe Ward-Wallace 12:23

Now that we have the Natural History Museum, it now puts us in a, it puts us in one of those positions of being able to determine who we bring in. And what I mean by that, what if you if you bring people in from this community, you now enable them financially, you know, to be able to create things in our community.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 12:46

And you keep culturally relevant food, right, you know, you're not bringing people who are from outside the community. So he's referencing the Natural History Museum contract that we just signed, which is the new arm to our company, which is our Slack hospitality company, where we are now the Hospitality Management for the entire Natural History Museum for the next 10 years. And we can curate out of our local communities. Absolutely. And we can help hold down the roots and allow people to be able to afford to stay.

J Joe Ward-Wallace 13:19

Being able to eventually pay people a livable wage, and they could actually live in this community stay in this community. So it's it the timing is something else. We didn't mean Doomsday with, you know, it's all going to be taken over. Because at the same time, we have an opportunity, or our company has an opportunity to, to make some change.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 13:43

The impetus for South LA cafe was because we had the premonition of what the change was happening, we were seeing it before our eyes. And it was upsetting. And we felt helpless and hopeless, like a lot of the community members do. Because most often when you have less resources, you're the last one to know, right? And so when you when the changes are happening, you're not really well positioned to do anything about it, right. And so your fight, you're trying to resist a change that's already been in works for 1020 years. And so for us, we started seeing the science and that's why we said you know, we're not going to be able to completely change it, but we can do our part. And so what does that look like let's put down roots, this creative space, let's you know, create safety, let's create community, let's focus on the local people. Let's focus on the black and brown people focus on our history, our heritage, our culture, and also allow those people to create the next wave of culture what is south central South LA look like to those people now, then let's find a way to bring them together and and really allow them to put down roots that builds a legacy for the future.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 14:54

I'd like to reflect on a number of things you just described, which are really tremendous. And I just like to point out on your website, you've listed that you've delivered 33,000 grocery bags and 990,000 meals since the onset of the pandemic. So kudos to you that's really critical. And also, it's a local response to a local condition. You know, there are real disparities in health outcomes based on these determinants of health, which is what you were describing in terms of systemic racism and poor access to healthier foods and exercise and all the other pollution, whatever. I mean, there's so many pieces to this, right. So I really think that that was clarifying of you, but also reflects the your understanding that you are coming from the community and know your community. You know, one of the things that cilia you mentioned in interviews is about how being an entrepreneur usually that takes three to five years before you really are going to go for it, and that you should keep your day job before you jump into the entrepreneurship. Now, I know Joe, you've retired, which is great. So you, you've you had your day job and and then silly, are you still doing entrepreneurial coaching and so forth?

C

Celia Ward-Wallace 16:13

Yes, I am. But you know, I teach entrepreneurship, I teach business. But one thing that I didn't realize until I experienced it is, if you're going to open up a mom and pop shop, you're going to end up having to work full time. And, and or 100 hours a week, but and so full full time and your own business and full time in a in a brick and mortar is a different schedule than your nine to 5 40 hour a week, you know, corporate job or government job. But for me, I had built this great big brand and practice and I was on TV and I was speaking engagements. And you know, all of my dreams were coming true. But I It started with a small whisper. But it got louder and louder. That something even bigger was coming idea that I needed to slow down and start pulling, you know, pulling back training more people to take on the responsibilities not having it be me centered and focused, and you know, sort of spreading the wealth going to what I had always imagined more of an egalitarian model, more of a practice and affirm and that I personally needed to just sort of slow down and pause and allow the spaciousness for what was to come to come through to sort of birth the new baby, you know, I've written a book about practical spirituality, and I do believe in being conscious and intentional with your life. And that if you can do that, often, you know, there's signposts along the way messages that come through other people, things that you're supposed to see that you may or may not normally, because you're you know, life is hard, and you're working and trying to pay the bills, which, as you can imagine, you know, after taking 10 years to build up to the pinnacle of the career that I thought I was destined to have to then start to receive the signs, you know, this is great, but there's something even bigger that we're here to use you for, it could be really, really scary to say, you know, hey, I'm going to pull out a little bit from what I was doing. So all of that to say, as we started conceptualizing South LA Cafe on South LA market, I realized I was going to have to stop doing as much coaching and consulting and I had to be much more, you know, intentional, and what how I was going to show up in those spaces, but I still very much thought it was going to be 50/50 or 60/40. But when I got into the cafe, the minute it open, you know, Joe and me behind the counter. And you know, we're learning to be baristas together, you know, and we're the engine behind the cafe. And there was this very compelling aspect of us being to local residents from the community married, raising two children that really were passionate and driven, and, you know, had this big why, but all of that to say, my coaching and consulting has served me well, because now we look at that side of things as the think tank as the side of things that is coming up with the frameworks, the ideologies to curriculums, the models, you know, what are we doing, and why are we doing it and how are we doing it? And then let's document those processes. Even if they're a work in progress.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 19:37

You're really reflecting the sort of you were preparing for this your whole life that you didn't know it existed, kind of. I've heard you both talk a lot about good old fashioned work ethic to and slow and steady wins the race. Those kinds of mottos, I think are really useful for all of us to hear.

C

Celia Ward-Wallace 19:57

Hopefully that becomes content that for your listeners today, and in the future, where people like us that want to do things like us, we, you know, we'll be able to say, hey, we don't have all the answers. But here's, here's, here's the blueprint, here's how we did what we did. And we'd love to support you in journeying that way. So I think that, you know, whether it's the universe, God, my higher self, whatever it is, I knew that all of this was going to come full circle, and that the coaching and consulting was always meant to be because that's where I sort of got my chops, right. That's where I learned that I am meant to be a teacher, I love teaching, you know, I have a gift for communication. I love speaking, I love writing, right? I have a gift for branding and marketing. And I've I learned all of that through that journey. Joe has a long background in sales and marketing, you know, so in our division of labor, he always takes the lead with the negotiations, the partnerships, you know, and so we've taken this bag of tricks that we've cultivated over the, you know, several decades and then brought it into the South LA Cafe universe, that now we've hit this threshold or this resonance point, that's now creating this magnetic vibration that we're getting amplified. What

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 21:16

What you described Celia about your own business and developing it and then mentoring others to sort of take it on as in the leadership roles, I think is a really valuable lesson for many people who start their own businesses or their own nonprofits. I heard a lot about using the consulting and coaching to help replicate your methodology for others, which is part of your mission, and, you know, to share, right? And be a catalytic change maker, what would you say, Joe, in your career as a fireman taught you some skills in that role?

J

Joe Ward-Wallace 21:56

Some things that you that I learned in the fire department, that is paying attention to detail, you know, because as a fireman, you know, if you don't pay attention to detail, someone dies. So you know, I don't want to make that drastic, but cleanliness, the grind, making, getting it done, no matter what you're faced with, because as a fireman when you go on, in situations, you don't always know what what you're going to be faced with. And, believe it or not, it prepared me for the cafe and the market, because I'm hit with things all day long that I think the average person would have just, you know, freaked out about and so you just you don't panic, you just go, let's get it done. So I think the grit and problem solving is what I can take from the fire department and bring it on, like not the end of the world, we can handle it.

D

Dr. Wendy Slusser 22:55

You both provide an example of how as you're going on your journey in life, how much you pick up and can apply to other situations or other jobs or other experiences other relationships at UCLA. Celia, you had a professor, Dr. Jerome, Rainbow, rainbow. Yeah. And you did a lot of intergroup consciousness and prejudice kinds of work with him. And I would love to hear how you brought that into the work that you're doing now.

C

Celia Ward-Wallace 23:26

Yes, my specialization was on intergroup conflict and prejudice. I had a dual major, which was World Arts and Cultures. And then also sociology, I have not ever escaped my path, which is, in particular, a very big emphasis on equality and justice. And, you know, it's part of why I went to law school. Even though I knew I didn't want to be a lawyer, I felt the sense of obligation and privilege of if you could go to graduate school that you should. And yet, even though I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with my life, and what I wanted to study, I thought, well, let's do law school and study civil rights law. You know, when I was in eighth grade, I led I literally led the walkout against, you know, the Gulf War. And in high school, you know, I was helping to lead and found a group called alliance that was birthed out of at that time, I went to Fairfax High School, and it was, you know, early 90s. And, you know, there was a lot of Latin and black violence that was happening as part of the broader picture of gang violence as part of the broader picture of, you know, mass incarceration happening in our communities and all of that. And so I was part of a group of people that created a group called Alliance and we would go, we would get permission to go but we go each classroom and do a little speech, you know, hey, we have this great club happening at lunch, you know, come on out, and you know, come back in circle and let's talk right. All of that to say the program at UCLA that I started focusing on and getting smaller and smaller on was rooted in having really challenging difficult conversations of bringing a cross section of people together. Before Kimberly Crenshaw coined intersection, it intersectionality, you know, and now we reclaim that as if it's a new concept, but it's been around for a long time. Even before that, it was happening, and people were studying it, we just didn't have that phrase. And so this was an opportunity to bring a cross section of people of, you know, all different race, class genders together. This is a huge, huge, huge part of who I am, and, you know, it will never go away. And so I think, for me, now that I have been blessed to be adopted by the South Central Community, I feel so grateful to be a part of this extended community and family. But I also never forget the whiteness that I bring to this space and the privilege that I bring to this space. And I think that between my parents and my personal journey, through my education process, that that is something that I carry very, with me all the time, right? It's something that is a big part of my identity. I'm the first person to name it, to speak it, to bring it out. Because even though I am welcomed and accepted, I also know that there's people who don't welcome me and don't accept me and for valid reasons, right. And so I think the more that we're able to speak to it, to name it, to unpack it, what is the appropriate place for me in any of these conversations at this point in time, and as always, I think, is there someone else that shouldn't be saying or doing the things that I am, that is a more appropriate person, I still walk out the front door, and out of my whole family, my two daughters and my husband, I'm the only one that's not vulnerable to police brutality, because of the color of my skin. And as welcomed and loved and comfortable as I feel it's my duty to hold that piece of me. That's the clear, you know, difference in me, so that I can advocate so that I can take up spaces where it's appropriate for me to do so. And I can do whatever I can to protect those around me and my community?

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:24

Well, I think it's a really profound and it's so you're so self aware. And, you know, it's really important for all of us to be conscious of our privilege. And there's so much more that I want to talk to you about that we've run out of time on this podcast, we'll just have to keep checking in with your progress. Since it seems even though it's slow and steady, it's pretty creative and enriching. For all of us to learn more about, we'd like to end all our podcasts with a question, what does it mean for you to live well?

J Joe Ward-Wallace 27:57

Wow. Well, for me to live well, is, you guys gonna think this is corny. But to be able to wake up in the morning, and walk over to my coffee shop, in my own neighborhood. That's living well, for me. That makes me happy.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 28:20

I can't wait. So you don't have to get up and go to work at your coffee shop, walk and drink coffee.

J Joe Ward-Wallace 28:29

That's what I meant. That's the goal.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 28:30

Yeah. And I think for me, I think that staying aligned to my purpose, and path is a huge part of that. And part of that overarching purpose is about a holistic approach to my life, you know, and so wanting to make sure that I have time allocated for my relationships for my children, for my personal health and wellness, and you know, for my husband, and all of the facets of my life wheel, which are not just about my livelihood, but are about all of the things that make me well, and making sure that all of them are getting some attention, getting some love

J Joe Ward-Wallace 29:15

I should have let you go first, haha.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:18

Actually, both of those are just lovely summations of an extraordinary interview. I think your beta testing zone starts from the two of you and your relationship and your partnership and your strengths. Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

C Celia Ward-Wallace 29:35

It's an honor. Thank you.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 29:41

It was such a joy to speak with these two bright, motivated individuals. I am moved by their undying hard work that is making a profound impact in their community. Here's what I'm carrying with me this week. Putting power back into the community is an important goal and social change. And if you follow your instincts and your values as cilia and Joe do that will lead you to both meaningful and challenging places. So thanks again everyone for joining us for this episode, check out our website to explore our episode or to give us feedback on our contact form. And keep up to date by following us at healthy UCLA on Instagram and subscribing here, talk to you soon take great care. This episode was brought to you by the Semel healthy campus initiative