

## Champions for Social Good Podcast

### Empowering Women & Girls with Storytelling: A Conversation with Sharon D'Agostino, Founder of Say It Forward

**Jamie:** Hello, and welcome to the Champions for Social Good Podcast, the podcast for people dedicated to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino, Director of Marketing with the Corporations and Foundations Division of Blackbaud. I'm here today with Sharon D'Agostino, a passionate advocate for the health, safety, education, and empowerment of girls, women, and children globally, and also the founder of Say It Forward. Welcome Sharon.

**Sharon:** Thank you, Jamie. I'm thrilled to be here.

**Jamie:** Yeah, we're so happy to have you here with us. Can you start off telling us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about Say It Forward?

**Sharon:** Of course, thank you. I've had an interesting path to Say It Forward. I spent a number of years in the private sector, and the last 10 years there were interested in philanthropy. And in that space I became even more committed to the health, safety, education, and empowerment of girls, women, and children. And when I left the private sector I decided that there was something I could do to help, and I founded sayitforward.org.

**Jamie:** That's great. And how has everything going with it since founding it?

**Sharon:** It's terrific. It's a web platform where I hope that any woman, any girl, anywhere, in any language, will share one of her stories of overcoming cultural norms or self-limiting beliefs. Any definition she has of how she has taking a step towards empowerment. And it's exciting. We have now stories from 17 countries, which is really thrilling. Most in English, some not. The ones that are not in English, we have mostly translated into English. So they're there both in the language of the heart, of the girl or woman who shared her story, but also in English to ensure that more women can read the stories.

**Jamie:** Right. You've been having great traction. Can you tell us a bit about maybe the impact that some of these stories have had? Do they start off on your website maybe, and then maybe they travel on to another platform or something like that?

**Sharon:** Yes. The impact is, I guess we talk about it in several ways. I would start by talking about the impact of the girls and women who actually have shared their stories. Because what has happened in a number of cases is that either immediately after the story has been posted, or sometimes a few weeks later I hear from the person via email. In one case a young woman told me, "I can't believe that anyone cares about what I have to say." In another case a woman wrote that she had been carrying this story around with her since childhood and was so grateful that someone wanted to hear it. Those are some examples from women who have shared their stories. I also have heard from women who have direct messaged me via Twitter to say that they've visited the site, that they've read some of the stories. Sometimes they mention a specific story and say, "This has really helped me." So it's exciting in that there is a benefit both from sharing one's story, but also then from reading other's stories with, I think, the common benefit being that girls and women don't feel that they're alone on their journey.

**Jamie:** Right, right. That's great. You and I previously discussed the large issue of girl and women empowerment, and you're saying that many people associate the concept solely with poverty or developing countries, but that really isn't the case. Do you wanna talk a little about that?

**Sharon:** Yes, I would love to. And certainly, the issue of girls' and women's empowerment in low resource countries is different and focuses very much on lack of access to education often and then lack of economic empowerment. But what I think is important to understand, is that the issue of girls' and women's empowerment is truly a global issue. And just in January, the end of January, the publication Science, it's a journal, and there was a story about research that was done in the US among children. And one of the findings is that by the time that they are six, many girls feel that some activities are not appropriate for them because they are not smart enough, and that is in the US. So this question of empowerment is something that is built into the cultural norms, into family norms and community norms, wherever we live. And I think that all of us, women and men, have responsibility to look at this and say, "What can we do make a difference?"

**Jamie:** Right. Do you see anything in motion now that maybe could help that situation?

**Sharon:** I believe that there are many women and men who are looking at data. Data about the lack of representation of women in governments globally and at various levels of government, the lack of women at senior leadership levels in many private sector organizations, statistics around violence against women, which are really quite staggering globally. The estimate is that one in three women will experience violence at some point in her life. Those are staggering numbers.

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**Sharon:** And the fact that the data is becoming available creates advocates. And I always like to stress that the advocates for girls' and women's empowerment are both women and men. They are individuals and organizations who recognize that our families, our communities, and our nations will be stronger if all voices are heard.

**Jamie:** Right. Well, I really like the idea there of bringing the data in because it is eye opening. Especially when you look at just our country and how big it is and all the different types of people and the perspective that people have. And the data is just right there in black and white. But then also a website like yours is combining that with storytelling. So I think those two things in combination are quite powerful. So have you found that you've been able to match those two things up, the power of a story with this data that we have?

**Sharon:** It's a great question. There's a lot that is being written now about the power of storytelling and ensuring that when numbers are shared, when data and statistics are shared, that the human part of those numbers comes to the fore. There are many things that excite me about sayitforward.org, but one of them is that anyone can share her story. So some women and girls have access to storytelling in their community or in an organization to which they belong. But this is an opportunity for anyone who can have access to the internet...

**Jamie:** Right.

**Sharon:** To share her own story. Or even if she doesn't want to share a story, to read the stories of others. The power of storytelling is in our DNA. Before anyone could read, storytelling, the oral tradition was very strong in how we kept traditions alive. And so my hope is that more girls and women will realize that they do have an inspiring story. They have many of them.

**Jamie:** Right.

**Sharon:** And many examples of times they have overcome their fear or other people's oppression or just the norms of their family or their community, to do what they feel they are capable of doing.

**Jamie:** Right, it's great. So what are your thoughts on the women's marches that took place in January?

**Sharon:** I believe it's quite exciting that many women, and many families actually, engaged globally in showing collective support for each other. Many of these individuals are people who had not been engaged, either

through their actions or their voice, around the issues that women face, and certainly many had. The mix of new people who came to the table to say, "I really can do something. I can make a difference. My voice and my presence matters.", I think is quite inspiring. Many times I believe individuals are concerned that they can't do enough. I am an advocate for every person doing something, finding her or his voice or time or talent to say, "This is what I care about and here's how I can help."

**Jamie:** Do you think that those marches had an impact, and do you think that we'll see more of them, or some other actions taken as a result of them?

**Sharon:** I certainly believe they had an impact. Certainly by the number of individuals, women especially, but women, men and families who showed up for them. So that in and of itself is an impact. The fact that they were noticed and that we're talking about them is an impact. And I believe that this is a great time for individuals to say, "With whom can I collaborate? Who else is working on something about which I care deeply, and together can we do more?" And I believe the answer is always, "Yes.", and that often we don't know how broadly the things we care about are cared about by others.

**Jamie:** Right, right.

**Sharon:** And so connecting with them, I think, has a great power in changing some of the cultural norms that we all hope to change.

**Jamie:** Right, right. And I think that's another powerful thing about your website, is that it can serve to connect people. 'Cause a person reading a story, a person telling a story, and then if there's that connection there. Do you find that your site sometimes is a catalyst for just two people saying, "Hey, let's work together," a group of people? Do you find that that's been happening through the website?

**Sharon:** Yes, and what I've seen, because we have a social media presence on Twitter, both I do personally and Say It Forward does, and so what I see is that some of the women who have shared their own stories start sharing other women's stories.

**Jamie:** Gotcha.

**Sharon:** Or making a connection that way, which I find it very encouraging. A point that I'd like to make sure that we stress when we talk about girls' and women's empowerment, is that when we address whether it is in a family or an organization or a community, the limited voice that we allow, the limited listening in which we engage, we actually can shift diversity and inclusion of all. So when more women's voices can be heard, then more men, whose voices sound different and whose opinions are different from the majority of others, can also be heard. This question of empowerment, I believe, is an opportunity for us to look well beyond girls and women. Although for me and my personal passion, I believe that girls, women, and children are great groups of which to start.

**Jamie:** Yeah, I like that idea that it's an aggregate and it builds or it becomes a multiplier in some way. I really like that. Where do you think there could be improvement in this sort of movement? Is there anything that you think that could be done better in terms of, "Let's really give this movement a boost."?

**Sharon:** That's a great question and a number of answers come to mind, because that research that I've just cited that was in the journal, *Science*, is fresh on my mind. I think obviously something that we are collectively doing in influencing children is putting pressure, I believe, both on girls and boys, to define what acceptable behavior is and what are they capable of. And while a lot of the conversation has been around limiting girls, I would also suggest that the ways that we expect boys to act and behave puts pressure on them. It's undue pressure all the way around. So what can we all do? We can all be much more mindful of how we talk to each other, how we talk to children, what assumptions we make about what people are thinking and feeling. And I believe the one thing that we can all start doing immediately, is listening. Really listening. Listening with our whole being, because that's the only way that we can really begin to understand other people's experiences of

this world. And listening is hard to do. Most of us are capable of doing it if we have hearing intact, but actually putting anything else out of our minds and listening to what each other have to say, I believe, is a great start in this long journey to empowerment.

**Jamie:** Yeah, it's interesting. The article, the Science article, just by time of a girl reaches the age of six. So I think it's what you just said earlier, that you have to start early and stop, I guess, projecting what your own expectations might be on this person. And so I think part of it comes down to educating parents then on how to actually raise a very small child. Do you see any of that happening, or do you see a road towards telling people just very simply what you just said here, as you're raising your child, even at an early age, don't project stereotypes on them, and stuff like that? Do you see any of that beginning, or do you see a path towards being able to do that?

**Sharon:** There are many people much more qualified than I to talk about early childhood development.

[chuckle]

**Sharon:** So I leave that to a future podcast to your conversation with one of them. I do absolutely think that being mindful of how we talk to children, of the expectations that we have, before they can even speak, is critically important. And certainly there is a lot of data that suggests that is the case. And I'm not an expert in all of that, so I can't cite it. What I also believe is that the expectations that we have for each other, for how we handle the challenges of the world around us, makes it easier or harder for any one individual to be fully realized and to achieve their fullest potential. This is true of women, it is true of men, it is true of girls and boys, wherever they are. And being more connected and understanding, more compassionate, I believe, is going to not only advance the empowerment of girls, women, and children, but also the feeling of inclusion of all voices. Those whose opinions are different from ours, as well as those whose opinions are similar to ours, as long as we're committed to learning from each other and to supporting each other.

**Jamie:** Right, right, right. So, returning back to something you said earlier about the data not looking so good as far as women in maybe leadership positions and in either companies or in government. What are some of the things that you see happening that'll change that, or what are some of the things that you think should happen to change that?

**Sharon:** Well, the availability of data. In the Twitter sphere hashtag gender data centers a lot that has been explored in the last, I would say, six months or so about the lack of gender data and the importance of gender data. So knowing what the statistics are really helps. As you and I were discussing a few moments ago, connecting the stories. So what does that mean in a company, in a country where there are not women in leadership positions? What does that actually translate to? How do the women feel? How do the men feel? The storytelling aspect of that, I believe, is also important. The changes that I see are, I would say, encouraging. And as someone who is patient by nature in some things and impatient in other things, I'm a bit impatient with the rate of change, and hoping that more and more individuals, regardless of where they are in the world, will say, "Yes, I believe diversity and inclusion is important. I think empowerment of all is important. And what can I do to make a difference?"

**Jamie:** I think we hear that more and more, is this idea of, "What can I do?" Versus, "What are you guys gonna do about this?" And you had talked a little bit about this earlier, that more people, more women, are feeling that and taking matters into their own hands and thinking, "What can I do to help?" I think we're seeing that across the board for a lot of different causes. Have you been seeing more and more of that for this particular cause?

**Sharon:** Well, there are a number of outstanding organizations globally that are focused on the issues that we are talking about. And there are also communities globally, in resource rich settings and in resource poor settings, where communities are coming together and saying, "We need to be more inclusive." So yes, I am seeing that. Going back to an earlier point: Are we seeing enough of it? I don't think so. Not yet. But I am optimistic and I believe that the trends that we are seeing, the fact that you and I are having this conversation, is a signal that more and more people are interested and committed.

**Jamie:** Right. In your work when, you were working in a corporation, and you were in a Fortune 50 corporation, what was your role there?

**Sharon:** I started out on the commercial side of the business, so I spent many years working in basically running an organization and having responsibility for P&L. And then for the last 10 years that I was at that organization I had responsibility for strategic philanthropy and corporate citizenship.

**Jamie:** Okay, so can you tell us a little bit about making that shift?

**Sharon:** Oh yes, it's an interesting shift to go from the day-to-day running of a business to move to a corporate center. So that in and of itself was a big shift. The shift to focus on strategic philanthropy was, I would say, less a shift, because it's still very much a focus on having a strategic plan, deciding what is important, with whom you will partner, and how will you measure results. So the private sector has a high focus on strategic planning, on metrics and evaluation, on course correcting, if you will. And so that is also true in strategic philanthropy. All of the partners that I worked with then were very much focused on measuring the impact of the work that they were doing.

**Jamie:** Okay. And did you have a focus on girl and women empowerment, or was it a bunch of other things?

**Sharon:** We had a broader scope than that, for sure.

**Jamie:** Okay. And so then it was your personal passion then that kind of lead you to start your own...

**Sharon:** To Say It Forward?

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**Sharon:** So yes. What would happen often and what really drove me to take the step and launch sayitforward.org, is that when I would travel to remote settings and I would return, invariably a friend or a colleague would say, "It must be really tough for women there." And it was always this thought that surfaced repeatedly, that the issues around girls' and women's empowerment where issues over there, wherever over there is, and not issues that we face daily wherever we live. As I thought about things, like there are many things that I can do and there are many things that I still do. Sayitforward.org is something that gives every girl and woman an opportunity to share her story. So that's one of the ways that I can support girls and women on their journey to becoming even more empowered.

**Jamie:** Right. When you were in the corporation, what were some of the grants that you gave out and the causes you were helping to fund?

**Sharon:** The work that our team did was quite diverse. It would be a challenge, I believe, to single out any one partnership. What I am delighted to talk about is the importance of partnership. The team of people with whom I worked were very committed to having partnerships with shared responsibility, clear roles and responsibility, and understanding that we are in this together. We also learned that, as is true with relationships in our life, that there are relationships that work really well, and then there are relationships where we have to revisit some of the ground rules.

**Jamie:** Right.

**Sharon:** And we certainly had to do that, not often, but sometimes we needed to do that. Relationships, partnerships are all based on trust, and I believe that this topic of empowerment is also a question of trust. Trusting that someone else can do something as well as we can, and giving them the space to do it.

**Jamie:** Right. What were some of the things that you think were good about the corporate philanthropy that you guys were doing, and what were some of the things that could have been improved? In terms of just a general commentary on corporations and grant making and working with non-profits and other groups. What do you think were some of the things that were really good about it, and what do you think are things that could use some improvement?

**Sharon:** I think the most exciting aspect of corporate social responsibility is that the private sector sees that it has a responsibility to communities and to countries that go beyond things that are nice to do, but really this is a requirement. And many, many, many private sector players globally see and recognize their responsibility. That, I think, is an incredibly good thing. I also believe that having employees engaged throughout an organization, having employees of an organization feel a connection to making a difference in their local community, is really important, and that is the big plus. I believe that what our NGO partners would say were some of the challenges, are the sustainability of programs. So insuring that there is really grass roots on the ground engagement, so that programs are focused on efforts that will help strengthen the community.

**Sharon:** And not be a, "We're here today and we're gone tomorrow, and what good has come of this?" I think this is a question of connection on the ground and local community engagement. Because what you know and I know is that the wisdom of a local community is the wisdom we need to tap into when we are supporting local communities and making any kind of change. And they are wise. So the recognition that none of us goes to someplace with the answers. But we go with a set of questions and perhaps a set of ideas and even an evidence base of something that has worked before, we still need to approach local leaders and understand what they think will work in their community.

**Jamie:** Gotcha. I think that's good advice. Did you get involved at all with the Millennium Goals or now since 2015, we have these Sustainable Development Goals? Now, of course, you're working on one of the critical ones. Any thoughts on those goals? Either back when you were working with the corporation and also now of course, as you work towards improving one of the more significant ones?

**Sharon:** I believe that global goals are critically important and there were a lot of lessons that were learned through the Millennium Development Goals about ensuring that the goals were really understood and that there were metrics in place to see on a country-to-country basis, whether countries were making progress. What I believe is true about the Sustainable Development Goals, is that because countries were more engaged in the actual development of the goals, which is why there are so many more goals than the Millennium Development Goals, that there will be a higher sense of commitment and accountability. For most of the information that I have seen, and I'm not an expert in this field, but most of the information that I've seen points to the importance of national plans that set very specific goals and targets and then milestones for achieving them. Which is actually true of any plan, whether it's a national plan or a personal plan. [chuckle] What do we need to do? How are we going to do it? And how are we checking ourselves along the way?

**Jamie:** Yeah. Do you see yourself crossing paths, or Say It Forward, does it end up crossing paths with it maybe a corporation working on that goal or a local organization? Has anything like that been happening where, "Hey, we're trying to make progress towards this SDG, and we see your website." Has anything like that happened?

**Sharon:** In the last couple of months, I've had a number of organizations who have reached out. I'm very clear at this point that this is really about storytelling. So this is about ensuring that more girls and women feel comfortable sharing their story, will share their story. And any organization that wants to support, within their organization, storytelling is awesome. I'm not looking for support or funding for Say It Forward. It is something that I am doing because I believe in the importance of girls and women finding and using their voice.

**Jamie:** That's great. What's next for you? What's next for the website? What are your thoughts on the next few years?

**Sharon:** I have lots of thoughts about the next few years.

[chuckle]

**Sharon:** My first thought is, how do we ensure that we have more stories that get shared, and more girls and women who know the site and, even if they don't want to share story, who will come and read stories? I'm excited that in June of 2017, we will take Say It Forward to the International Conference of Midwives in Toronto. Every three years the International Confederation of Midwives has a gathering of midwives globally. Three years ago it was in Prague, and it's going to be in Toronto. And so we are taking Say It Forward to collect stories of midwives around the world.

**Jamie:** That's great.

**Sharon:** It's very exciting.

**Jamie:** Great. Well, is there anything else that you'd wanna add?

**Sharon:** Two things. I would say thank you so much for the invitation to be here...

**Jamie:** My pleasure.

**Sharon:** And talk with you. This was really terrific. And secondly, I would urge any girl or woman who's listening to this podcast to check out [sayitforward.org](http://sayitforward.org) and consider sharing her story.

**Jamie:** Fantastic. Yeah, the website is incredible. Congratulations on it.

**Sharon:** Thank you.

**Jamie:** And best wishes for continued success with it. It's really fantastic. Thanks, Sharon, for joining us today. It's been our pleasure. For our listeners, as Sharon said, you should be checking out [sayitforward.org](http://sayitforward.org). You can also follow Sharon on Twitter, [@SharonDAgostino](https://twitter.com/SharonDAgostino). You can also follow Say It Forward, [@sayitforwardnow](https://twitter.com/sayitforwardnow). And also check out [@AwakeningTrue](https://twitter.com/AwakeningTrue). And you should subscribe to our podcast so that you don't miss an episode. And you can keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter, [@jamieserino](https://twitter.com/jamieserino), [@MicroEdgeLLC](https://twitter.com/MicroEdgeLLC), and [@Blackbaud](https://twitter.com/Blackbaud). Thank you for listening.