

Dave Lindner

Transcript

Podcraft Productions

Varnya (intro):

So, you've heard the Connected Us podcast series and you're keen to get started. Where do you begin? Dave Lindner's the guy you need to talk to. Dave is the Community Manager at Befriend. I spoke to him about how Befriend facilitates community connections and also his personal journey from loneliness to community all-star. Okay, those are my words, not Dave's.

I began by asking him what exactly the Befriend social network is...

Dave:


It's about people connecting over shared interests, rather than geographic location, or background, or language, or culture, or anything like that. It's about what's your interest? Do you like knitting? Yeah, you do. Great. Would you like to share that with other people in your community? What would that look like? Why would you do that? How often would you do that? How long would you be there for? Who would you invite, and how would you invite those people? Through Befriend, we support someone, who we call hosts, to put on those events - between 100-200 events a month or so.

Varnya:

Do people approach you, do you approach people, is it a bit of both?

Dave:

It's a bit of both. People who come to us, who want to be active in their community, and want to do something, and maybe are familiar with us. Maybe they have been to events before. Maybe they have just heard about us, or maybe they have seen an advert that says we want people to come and be hosts with us.



They find out a bit more, come along, they go to a session for a couple of hours with us. They decide on something they want to do in the community. One of the things that makes Befriend unique is that any adult is welcome at any Befriend event. Whatever your cultural background, your linguistic background. Whether you have a disability or not, whether you suffer mental health or not. You might be really a social person who loves to come along to things and meet new people, or you might be really isolated and just need to meet someone. Whatever your background, you are welcome at a Befriend event.

The easiest way to do that is through common shared interests. It's the idea that... Janet Klees, her four pillars of connection. She's been researching it for 20, or 30 years, this idea of community connection. She talks about how there are four pillars to people forming deep, meaningful connections. One of those is shared passions and interests.

It makes sense to us from certainly a research perspective, and a practical and experiential perspective. We see that every day. The activity, the hobby, the event is the thing that connects people. You and I might like walking, so we go for a walk. Then we invite other people to join us. I don't like crochet though, so I won't go to crochet class.

Varnya:

Why not? [laughs]

Dave:

Crochet is just not my thing. These hands are typing hands, they are not making hands. [laughs]

Varnya:

No judgment. [laughs]

Dave:

No judgment. [laughs]

It's the idea that things that people care about, that they're passionate about, and they want to share those things.

Varnya:

There are, I guess different groups that emphasize difference perhaps, let's take disability as an example, or let's take culturally linguistic communities as an example. It's getting people whose commonality is their disability, whose commonality is their culture.

Befriend has chosen to do something quite different, which is mix-it-all-up, everyone can come. What's the feeling behind that? What's the reason for that?

Dave:

The main reason for us is, by getting people together from different backgrounds and different experiences, you end up with a deeper, richer, experience. Both, in your events but in your life as well, to understand where different people are coming from, their experiences, create a little bit more empathy. Create better connections between people.


It seems to us, I guess, the world is becoming more divided. What we actually need to do is see the things that unite us, and actually we have in common, rather than the small number of differences that we have. To offer people opportunities to connect with people who are not like themselves. There's real value in that.

Varnya:

It sounds like there is almost a social good aspect there in some way, just because I suppose if you're getting all different people together around a hobby. They're getting to know, for instance, other people from other cultures, or other people with disability, or people who are experiencing mental health issues. Then, as you say, you're increasing their empathy, which then has, I mean, who's going to argue with that? That's a pretty beautiful social good.

Dave:

Yeah, absolutely. It is the one thing that, I guess, we do a bit differently to everyone else, as you say. There's that process, in terms of, encouraging and supporting hosts. Then there's practical things like we offer insurance. Then we offer ongoing support to host, so that's additional training to understand maybe how to interact with people with a disability, for example, if they've not had that experience.



How to manage difficult situations or challenging conversations. We want people to be included. We're not naive enough to think that everyone's going to always get along with everyone else.

Varnya:

No. [laughs]

Dave:

That just is not going to happen, right? Inevitably, there's going to be some conflict in some groups at some point.

Varnya:

How do I manage that?

Dave:

How do we manage that? We, as an organization, can't be on the ground at 200 events a month, and nor do we want to be. One of the overriding philosophies of the social network and how we operate, is that like any good NGO, we're working to put ourselves out of business. The world shouldn't need an organization like Befriend to enable people to connect. It does, unfortunately.


In the back of our mind, constantly, when we're looking at events and we're supporting hosts, is the idea of what will this look like, when Befriend no longer exists.

Varnya:

What's your personal theory on why you do need to exist?

Dave:

It's interesting that cities are the most populous places on Earth, but they're the most lonely places on Earth. We have all these people around us. Yet, the research tells us that loneliness is now one of the new global health crises. We are social beings, and we are designed to connect. Yet, we live in these places that we are so isolated.



We never see anybody, with the number of friends that we have, the people we can actually call friends, has dropped significantly over the last 20, 30 years. People are lonely. The health statistic that always springs to mind for me is that we know that loneliness is as bad for health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Varnya:

Wow. I hadn't heard that.

Dave:

The government will do anything it can to stop you smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Slowly we're starting to realize that actually, it's not just the government's responsibility of course, but we're starting to realize actually that we need to do something about loneliness.

The New Zealand government last year released its well-being budget that prioritize its citizens' health and well-being over and above the GDP. A couple years ago now, the UK Government appointed a minister for loneliness.

These things are starting to take hold. The conversation in the public realm is starting to become bigger and more visible. We understand that these things are a problem. It's how do we solve them?


Varnya:

Can you think of any examples in the local area of communities or groups that you've had experience with that bring disparate people together for the purposes of social connection?

Dave:

In Befriend, one of the best examples that I've got is there's a group down in Kwinana, who play ukulele. Every week, they have 30 to 40 people turn up to play ukulele and sing along. That group was on its way out, and they came to Befriend and said, "We'd like to continue actually but we're just not really sure what to do."

They got some support through Jody, our community builder down in Kwinana. Now they have weekly sessions with 25, 30 for a huge variety of backgrounds. They're starting to do little public performances and that sort of thing as well.



It's just a great example of some of the work that, as an organization, we can do to support an already existing community group, or new one, to bring people together over sharing common interests.

Varnya:

Is it different ages, the group?

Dave:

Yes, actually.

Varnya:

Yes, I find that really interesting too, the multi-generational groups.

Dave:

Absolutely. There have been TV shows on the ABC about it and that sort of thing...the multi-generational stuff is so fascinating. There's repair cafés across Perth, but there's one that we, Befriend co-hosts in Belmont, and it happens once a month. Again, often older people with skills, sharing those with people to repair items from a sustainability perspective, keep them out of landfill, and keep them going for longer. Also that idea of skill-sharing often provides the opportunity to learn how to repair things.


Varnya:

I know you have a story of community connection particularly close to your heart. Tell me about the Vic Park Collective.

Dave:

The Vic Park collective exists to make Vic Park uniquely awesome. We've been around for nearly seven years. We put on a range of events in our local community and invite people to participate. Last year we put on two sessions that we called "I am you are" and it was in direct response to the Christchurch terror attack in March 2019.

The implication of which was, we always knew the demonization of other people was an issue, but we always let it slide. "Uncle John, he's a bit racist, but that's OK." "Auntie Joan she's a bit homophobic but you know..." Then, after the attack the feeling was, this is no



longer acceptable. That attack was the line in the sand, after which we say this language no longer is acceptable in our community at any level, because we know that the ultimate end point of that language is the Christchurch terror attack and attacks similar to it.

We know that that's the inevitable outcome. Why do we let it happen? So in response to that, the collective, in conjunction with the Uniting Church in Vic Park and the Australian Islamic College, put on a couple of sessions.

The first session was a storytelling session really about or hearing from four people from very diverse backgrounds, who've been the subject of racism and being demonized. That was a quite intense and turbulent session, as I'm sure you can imagine. People sharing deeply personal and awful stories of being on the receiving end of hatred and bigotry.

Hearing those stories, I think for a lot of the audience was really eye-opening, and really led to a deep understanding or an understanding of sorts of what it would be like to be on the receiving end of that every day.

Varnya:

How brave for them to share those stories.


Dave:

Incredibly brave. Absolutely, it was a big roller coaster of emotion over the night as I'm sure you can imagine. It was incredible to hear people's stories.

The second session as a direct follow-up to that, was how we can take individual actions. When we hear language like that in the streets, or on the bus, or at the footy, or we read that language online. How can we as individuals respond to that in a non-threatening, non-escalating, not a pitchfork way, not vigilante but in a de-escalating, calm, rational way?

How can we step in, or be involved in that to support those individuals who are on the receiving end? Trying to bring people from many diverse backgrounds together to understand a little more deeply about how other people live their lives.

The personal highlight for me was at the end of the second session, a young Muslim guy came up to me and said, "Thank you, it was really amazing session, I really loved it." I said, "My pleasure, we're privileged to be able to do it." He said, "I've just moved to Perth." I said, "Where have you moved from?" He said, "I actually moved from New Zealand. I came here about two months ago."



I said, "What brought you over?" He said, "I was actually a survivor of the Christchurch terror attack, I was in one of the mosques. If you're having another session. I would love to speak at it."

I still get goosebumps right now even thinking about it. That was a light bulb moment for me around the impact that we can have in the work that we do. How we can bring people from such different backgrounds together. How we can learn a little bit more about each other from sitting and listening.

Varnya:

The thing that struck me when you were telling that story was, the power is in the individual because we all feel so powerless in the face of all kinds of stuff that's going on. That's the beauty of those sessions by the sound of it.

Of course, it's understandable that we feel powerless, but at the same time there are things that we can do that actually make a real difference.

Dave:

Absolutely. I think to have that realization that actually you can do things that matter to people.

Varnya:

Have you always been a community builder sort of guy? How did you get into this?

Dave:

I'd start by saying I've always loved the idea of community, really loved the idea of it. My parents were heavily involved in our schooling and our school community. They were heavily involved in amateur dramatics in their local community. I'd always struggled to find my community and I moved to Perth 12 years ago now for my wife's work.

We knew no one here, we have no family. We're not from here. The only people we knew when we moved were her colleagues, and they're lovely people, but they're her work colleagues.

To be honest, it was a real struggle for me for a number of years, maybe five, six years, feeling incredibly isolated and incredibly lonely here. That was challenging personally and

in relationship sense, and in a number of other levels that we might leave for next time.
[laughs]

Suffice to say that, at some point, I found the collective and I don't love the word, but I found my tribe. Suddenly there was this realization, there are other people like me. I know we've just talked about meeting people who are not like you and the value in that, but there's also real reassurance about meeting people who are like you. Makes you feel safe and secure and like you belong.

My journey, having met the collective, or found out about the collective was I messaged them and said, "I'm thinking, have you ever heard of a car-free day? If you haven't, here's an example. I've been studying it at Murdoch, a Master's in sustainable development. I think you should do something like that at Vic Park."

They said, "We've just literally formed our car-free working group, our first meeting is tomorrow night - talking of serendipity - would you like to come along?" I said, "Sure."

It felt safe. It felt secure. It felt, I can't put it any other way other than to say that I felt like I belonged. I was in that room of complete strangers. I knew no one else there, but it just felt comfortable. I was like, "These are my people."

Varnya:

What a relief after so long feeling isolated.

Dave:


Absolutely. Suddenly to have this realization that other people care about the same things I care about was incredible, absolutely incredible. I came home and I told my wife, just sheer excitement and joy of finding this and realizing that this was something I wanted to do.

Varnya:

It's funny, isn't it? Because we forget that, we forget that that feeling of belonging, of participating, we forget that it can be transformative.

Dave:

Absolutely. It really meant so much to me. You can see how much it means to other people when they make connections, when you see it happening at Befriend. We run an annual survey, we ask people your thoughts on Befriend. You read it, they say, "It's so great to be



part of something where I feel included, I feel like I belong." There's something in there for me also around trust as well and getting people, getting communities to start to trust each other again. There's a massive distrust at the moment between people, whether it's just neighbors, not knowing or not talking to each other.

Different cohorts of people in different groups, really distrusting each other. Actually there's a huge amount that we can do organizationally, or individually, or through reflection. As you start to rebuild some of that trust and get people to understand that most people are really lovely.

One of the conversations we're starting to have as an organization, as a social network, is the idea of inclusivity and what that means to individuals, and to us. Therefore, also the implications of what that means for us as an organization. It's a really interesting time for us. Up to now, as we've talked about already, it's been a case of inclusion - we open the doors to everybody. Anyone is welcome, there's real value in that and it's a really wonderful thing. But we've had a number of inquiries, over the last year or so, kind of half a dozen that have just bubbled up to the surface, this idea actually of people who actually want to associate with people who are similar to themselves.


Maybe who have autism or, maybe women from a cultural and linguistically diverse background, for cultural reasons will only associate with women from that same cultural background. Therefore they will never come to a Befriend event. Not in its current form, because that is open to everybody, and they feel uncomfortable in that space for many different reasons.

There might be people with a disability. They won't go to a Befriend event because it's not the right set-up for them. The room's wrong or the space is wrong. One of the conversations we're having at the moment is maybe what if we open Befriend up as a social network to those individual cohorts, to actually say, what if we had, for example, a culturally distinct, linguistically distinct and female-only group? What would that be like? What if we had a group only for people with autism. The conversation where it's headed at the moment is this idea that we can have both. This is where freedom comes in, the freedom to choose.

Varnya:

What would you say is the biggest hurdle to creating connections?

Dave:



The biggest challenge in creating genuine connection is actually starting to do it. It's actually taking the first step. As we've mentioned before, there are a lot of people who are very lonely. The absolute biggest challenge is to actually get out and do it.

It's easy for us to sit here in a nice, comfy room and say, "That's really hard," without maybe actually ever having experienced what that social anxiety looks like or that loneliness or being excluded feels like.

That's the hardest thing, would be to actually step out of the room and go to an event. The number of times that we hear stories of people who've gone to an event, sat in the car park, and driven home because they couldn't bring themselves to go in. They would have done that half a dozen times.

Eventually, when they take that first step to go in the room, I genuinely think that's probably the hardest thing for people to do. Because when you get out there and you go to an event, you're unlikely to make an amazing connection on the first time you go, let's be honest.

Overcoming that first hurdle and seeing how welcoming people are and feeling included, that will hopefully spark enough in you to be able to go a second time and a third time and a fourth time.

Varnya:

If there is one piece of advice you could give to people who are keen to build community, what would you say?

Dave:

Do it.

[laughter]

Varnya:

Just do it.

Dave:

Just do it.



Varnya:

Just get out there.

Dave:

There's no other option, really. No one else is going to do it for you. We can support you to do it. If you can't do it yourself, come and see us and we'll help you do it.

Varnya (extro):

Befriend's Dave Lindner, talking about the Befriend Social Network. If you're keen to get started on building your own piece of the network, head to befriend.org.au. That's also where you can find the rest of the Connected Us podcast series. I'm Varnya Bromilow - thanks for listening - see you next time.

Transcription by CastingWords