

Anna Taylor: Hi, welcome to Summaries. I'm Anna Taylor, Executive Director of The Greater Sum. We support nonprofits through funding, training and skills based volunteers. In this work we meet amazing nonprofit leaders, and Summaries are our way of amplifying their stories and sharing best practices.

Anna Taylor: Today I'm talking with Collie Turner, the founder of Heroic Gardens. This Philadelphia based organization provides US veterans and active duty military members on a fixed income access to free gardening services at home or within their communities. Collie, welcome.

Collie Turner: Thank you. It's so great to be here Anna.

Anna Taylor: It is great to be with you and to learn a little bit more about the work you're doing. Heroic Gardens is a very early stage nonprofit, so because many of the organizations in our network are in that same stage of thinking about issues that need to be addressed in their community and the best way to address them, we're really excited to learn more about how your group came to be and what's going into your planning and strategy for working with veterans in your community. To start out, I'm really curious to hear your story of how you got involved. What drew you to this issue?

Collie Turner: Sure, it's a long story so I'm going to try and condense it. But I am a third generation amateur gardener and I have always been affiliated with our military through the American Legion Auxiliary. My grandfather was in World War II, my father was in the Navy and my uncles and my aunts and my grandparents were always involved with the military and veterans once they came back.

Collie Turner: I didn't know I would be doing this kind of work, but I knew I had an affinity for it. And it wasn't until about 2012 perhaps, when I became the guardian for my grandmother, and she was on a very fixed income. And what I had learned was that nobody had ever applied for my grandfather's death benefits in the military. And it took me about three years and almost every Saturday going through rejection letters from the VA saying, "We don't have enough information to fund her."

Collie Turner: So fast forward three years later, what we found was somebody affiliated with the VA who offered to take on her case, and by this point she is a 94 year old woman. The woman that actually took on the case gave me the insight that her full time job was to actually help find our active duty and veterans that are coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq, they might be coming home to families that don't even have homes, and if they're coming home to a house, it may not be the way they left it.

- Collie Turner: That was devastating to me to hear, number one. And number two, I was so grateful that this is what this woman did in her full time and yet she was willing to take on my grandmother's case. So look, anybody can write a check and now that I'm on this side of the coin, I desperately appreciate that. But for me it was a little bit more personal. I thought, "What can I do to help these folks when they come back?"
- Collie Turner: Now look, I'm not a horticulturist, I'm not a therapist, I do not have a medical background, but I wanted to figure out a way to utilize something that brought me joy, and also I was using in my own discovery and exploration to help our veteran community. So that's really how the idea came to be.
- Anna Taylor: And you got a lot of traction with people for this idea. What did you learn about the network of services that are available to veterans and who's in that picture?
- Collie Turner: Yeah, so look, I'm a marketer by career. I've been in marketing for over 20 years, which also translates to I'm a talker, I've got a big mouth. So the first year that I decided I was going to do this... And by the way, I thought about this idea and I sat on it for like four or five years before I did anything because I knew it was something, but I didn't know what it was.
- Collie Turner: And I also didn't have the courage, and I say that with tremendous emphasis because I feel like a lot of folks are seeing needs in their communities and they just feel so helpless. "How am I going to make this happen?" Courage is the first and foremost thing you need. But for me, as I started socializing the idea, talking to emergency room nurses or talking to landscape designers or just talking to anybody affiliated with the military, the reality was this is a form of healing that is just starting to gain traction.
- Collie Turner: And the funny part about it is healing gardens and connecting veterans to utilizing nature as a form of healing has actually been around since World War II. It's just that the awareness of it and sort of where it fell in the issue attention cycle, I guess, hasn't been as prevalent as we would think. It is huge in Europe. So it's like, okay, we're the US, we're always the last to adopt over here.
- Collie Turner: So what's been fantastic is everyone I've talked to has said, "This is really cool. Nobody else is doing this. How do we put it in our community?" So we're still so young and would that be a dream of mine to operationalize this so we can take it national and put it in all of these different communities where there are very large veteran and active duty populations? Absolutely. Absolutely. That is on the horizon.

Anna Taylor: Now you mentioned that this had been something that people have experienced since World War II. Was this part of your grandfather's story as well?

Collie Turner: You know what, it was. I didn't realize it at the time because he was my grandfather and he had a huge garden. We actually had a family garden in Somers Point, New Jersey, that was literally the size of a football field.

Collie Turner: And I spent hours out there with him. And as a child these things don't connect, but I look back at that and how much time he spent out there and what he did out there. It made me realize somebody that... He came back and eventually developed Parkinson's and had lost his teeth.

Collie Turner: And all of these components of war, being outside and out in his garden really helped him with the healing process and probably his thought process as well.

Anna Taylor: I love what you're telling me about how the way your... the structure of this is very innovative but the concepts are very core to what we know about healing and self care and wellness. Tell me a little bit about how you brought people on board to the organization and got folks from diverse backgrounds involved?

Collie Turner: I went to the people I knew, and I knew could deliver, or I thought they could deliver. And I don't know if that is always the right way. What I mean by that is some people have been over the top with the support and ability to contribute and others are not.

Collie Turner: And it's hard to hold people to task when, one, you're not telling them what to do, which is in my first year and a half it's been difficult to define because I did not know until we actually had a project what I was going to need to know. So when I think about folks that are just starting out, I would say in any textbook, anything you download they say, "Oh, make sure you have a board."

Collie Turner: I would say think about that first before you start asking your cousin or your next door neighbor or somebody you think should be, because what's happened now in our official year two of being a 501(c)(3) is I have folks approaching me that are veterans, that are landscape architects, that are horticultural therapists, that work at outpatient centers at major universities, that work for the VA, that are all saying, "I need to be on your board."

Collie Turner: Those replace people that I brought in frankly, my dad. Now look, my dad's a vet. He had 35 years in the banking industry. It just made sense to me that he's my treasurer. It doesn't make any sense to me now. My dad lives in Naples,

Florida. We're based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. So I need the face to face financial muscle that I need to get this to the next level.

Collie Turner: So lots of lessons learned there. No hard feelings. My dad's perfectly happy being a retired veteran, that doesn't hurt his feelings. But I am seeing the opportunity to really hold onto some of these new relationships because the awareness that we are generating through a variety of channels, and people are taking us seriously because we actually have work that we're able to show.

Collie Turner: So like I said to my husband over the weekend, I was like, "The VA is answering my calls." And it wasn't that they weren't before. It was just not now. "Who is this person that's emailing me and calling me and asking me to partner? Probably not a priority." And that's okay because I wasn't there yet with my story.

Anna Taylor: But as you start to do the work and start to have more people who can talk about their experience with your organizations, and those folks start to be the ones who are really networked in this community, know the need, know the resources, it's getting a lot of momentum. That's fantastic.

Collie Turner: Yeah. They're as invested if not more. They're emotionally tied to it. I think that's a big part of it. You want your core committee to be emotionally tied for whatever reason it means to them. It doesn't have to be the uniform rationale.

Anna Taylor: As you grow and develop new partnerships, how do you decide how many projects you can take on, what kind of costs and what do you have to deal with to decide your capacity right now and in the future?

Collie Turner: I love that question because I feel like I grapple with it all the time. I was so conservative early on and I thought, "Oh, we're going to do..." I had no idea, "We're going to do four gardens a year." And the board said to me, "Oh, we should be able to do more than that."

Collie Turner: And I love when people say that, because in order to "do something," people got to show up. So if you've got a board where you only have one person out of eight people that is consistently showing up, and you've got one person, meaning myself, doing the volunteer recruitment and just hoping you get eight people, it really does limit the number of projects you can take on.

Collie Turner: That's number one. But number two is you can look at a yard and it's like looking at the sea. It's a mystery. So somebody might call us and say, "Hey, I'd love for you to come over and see, this is what I'm envisioning." And once you start digging in there, you realize, "Oh, this is a lot worse than we thought."

Collie Turner: So it's been a wonderful, wonderful lesson in understanding how to process and problem solve, because so far we've definitely had significant challenges. Like if I could tell you a year ago that, "Oh, guess what? I'm going to learn how to drive a backhoe." Like that never even would have been in my vocabulary or thought process.

Collie Turner: But hey, it's happened and it's happened out of necessity because if there's one thing we are when we take on a project, is we are persistent and tenacious and there there is no, "We're not going to do this," in our vocab at all. I know I got away from the question a little bit here, but I felt that that was really important to express.

Anna Taylor: Well, and side note, this is one of the things that I love about meeting people in the nonprofit community because you're at like a networking reception and you're chatting and so on and so forth. And do I dream that I'm talking to someone who was running a backhoe at their nonprofit real recently? The problem solving capacity in this sector is amazing, because what needs to be done will get done one way or another.

Collie Turner: And that goes back to my nonprofit background before I became a marketer and you learn to beg, borrow and steal. And I hate to say that, but it is true. Who can I barter with? I went out a lot to organizations that were for profit, but they were veteran owned.

Collie Turner: I didn't ask for anything for free, but I did ask for a nonprofit or military discount, and the outpouring of private donations were incredible. So we had a combination, it was more than \$3,000 at the end of the day, but what we had spent out of pocket was about \$3,000.

Collie Turner: So I can't... it's hard for me right now, I want to say like, "Anna, let's check back in a year from now when we've had maybe five to six other projects that have different needs to see if I can give you an average," because I'm looking at one right now we're about to start and I'm thinking it's about \$7,000.

Anna Taylor: How do you identify individuals or organizations that you're going to work with?

Collie Turner: What I do is I go with a plant and I spend an hour or two with the veteran. We actually have an intake form. So we talk about it and I get to know them. I get to know where they live, how they live, what their favorite colors are. One of the veterans actually had a catalog of plants, knew nothing about them, but she said these are the colors that I like.

Collie Turner: Because in the military you don't get choice. So for us it's all about our group is going to come in and you, if you so choose, you are the leader of this project. You are the one determining what your future space is going to look like, what colors are in it, how much you want to participate. One of our veterans has trouble breathing.

Collie Turner: So any plant we put in her yard has to be very low maintenance, because she can no longer go out there and take care of it herself. So there are lots of questions around even even us looking at what kind of son do they get? What kind of shade? What kind of seating area? One of our veterans has nothing in her backyard. She was sitting on a milk crate in the grass. So part of our plan is to build her a patio with some lounge furniture that she can actually sit outside and enjoy herself and look at what she has directed us to create.

Anna Taylor: That's fantastic. At this stage in the conversation I think people are tuning into the fact that you are a great storyteller, and you mentioned that your background is in marketing. How does that inform your work and the way you communicate about Heroic Gardens?

Collie Turner: I'm constant with the conversation across social media or digital channels, website, email when there's something to say, or there is a thought that is important. I have invested in social media spends and it's really helped with gaining followers and people that are supporting.

Collie Turner: I'm starting... and the way I can measure that is I'm getting donations from people in other states. California, Idaho, Florida. That's huge to me. That tipping point when you meet somebody that was not in your universe and they're sending you \$10. \$10 Buys five bags of soil, that's a big deal. That's a really big deal. So I just keep being persistent, having an opportunity to talk with you guys, to talk with The Greater Sum and knowing the commitment that you have, every opportunity is a touch point to reach somebody that you didn't reach the day before.

Collie Turner: I was invited to a Veterans Appreciation Day barbecue in North Philadelphia, and I want to tell you something, no one talked to me. It was so funny. And I'm okay because I just stand there and smile and handout temporary tattoos and stickers. But at the end, the gentleman that actually ran the event, he was a state representative and he came and he sat down with me and he said, "I want beehives. I want to do window boxes on all the veterans homes in my district. Like how do we make this happen? I'm a sustainability guy."

Collie Turner: That one conversation, that was the one thing I waited four hours for. I didn't know it was going to happen, but outside of being a marketer, it's say yes, it's smile, it's be grateful for whatever opportunity is right in front of you, and be present for it because you're going to miss it if you're not.

Anna Taylor: That's fantastic advice. Collie, as the organization grows and you do take on more projects and have more volunteers, how do the challenges evolve from where you started?

Collie Turner: Oh boy. Well, and so this is a great example. I need a volunteer coordinator. I need somebody that is not only saying, "Hey, we have an opportunity to volunteer," but volunteers are really important. And like everybody that touches the organization, it's important that they know that they're special and that they have made a difference.

Collie Turner: So when you say volunteer coordination, it is so much more. It is, yes, it's recruiting people, but then it's thanking them. It's helping them spread the word, helping them understand and even reflect on what's happening to them mentally while they're working. It's providing them with snacks.

Collie Turner: One of the things, what I have done this year is I've created a wishlist, an operating budget wishlist to include a salary for an executive director, which is so cool. And then funding for at least up to four projects in 2020, and then also stipends for interns. So I'm very, very invested and affiliated with Temple University and I do know many people in network.

Collie Turner: I've been able to have conversations to say, "This is the person that I'm looking for. Who is that person?" And as soon as we can identify that person, I will be leaning on them. And my intention is, this is the real world, this is experience. So my expectations will be pretty high, but I think that's okay because it will be a specific person that will join us. I would like that executive director position to be a veteran.

Anna Taylor: Perfect. Yeah, who better?

Collie Turner: Exactly. Exactly. I mean when you come to these events and you hear our veteran volunteers talking with the veteran we're serving, you and I as plain old civilians, we can't be part of that conversation. And it's a fascinating conversation.

Anna Taylor: And as a former volunteer coordinator myself, that was one of my thoughts when you said I need a volunteer coordinator. There's so much involved in this. Part of it is the capacity to listen to all of those individual volunteer experiences.

Anna Taylor: Because as you're trying to develop the best program possible, you've got one set of eyes and ears as the director, and you're thinking about, "Do we have enough materials? Is everybody fed? Are all of these things happening?" If you have that extra capacity to have your volunteers tell you all of the different fragments of perspective on your events, it's invaluable information.

Anna Taylor: But so often we're so busy that we miss it. So having that person to kind of collect and filter all that information can be incredibly valuable.

Collie Turner: And frankly, I mean I see that person also doing all of the social media, doing all of the administrative when it comes to speaking engagements, because that's the other fun part that I'm so tickled by. Like getting mail now where people are like, "Please come speak at our event."

Collie Turner: And I'm like, "With pleasure. Absolutely." In fact, I recently spoke at the Cohen Veterans Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and what was really fun, I gave a presentation to clinicians and social workers and intake staff that help veterans in the Delaware Valley.

Collie Turner: And before I started I came in with a whole row of herbs and I just put them in the middle of the table to do my own little science experiment. Kind of like to see what people would do. So some people came in and they were like, "Ah," I immediately relaxed. Some people wanted to touch them. Other people were like, "I don't know what kind of plant that is."

Collie Turner: It was just really funny. But it also demonstrated interactivity and the fact that there is a lack of just human awareness of the power that plants have on all of us. I mean I garden when I need to solve a problem.

Anna Taylor: Yeah. Yeah.

Collie Turner: Everybody can do it.

Anna Taylor: What an amazing experience you're bringing to the veterans whose gardens you work with, but also those volunteers to not just to spend your time in service, but to spend your time in service in a garden that you could conceivably drive past and see how the ground cover really took hold. There's such a beautiful vision in your work.

Anna Taylor: It's not a feel good today and hope that that carries you through experience. It's really, it's planting beautiful seeds. And Collie, I'm so grateful that you spent the time today sharing this with us and telling this story and getting people excited about it, and probably looking at their houseplants in a slightly new light.

Anna Taylor: And I want to say if you are working in nonprofit and you are interested in storytelling, Collie's website is heroicgardens.org and you'll see the stories of some of these gardens that she's describing, and I think it's a great example of how to connect people with your work and with the experience of it.

Anna Taylor: So Collie, thank you so much. Any final thoughts or any advice that either you got or you wish you got that you think would be helpful to our listeners?

Collie Turner: Yeah, absolutely. A couple of things. One, if you have the means or you know somebody, get a lawyer. You're going to need it for bylaws, you're going to need it for insurance, even if it's a friend. Go on LegalZoom, have them set it and forget it basically. Pay them to do all of that legwork for you up front, and it's worth it. It was worth it for me.

Collie Turner: I know a lot of times people don't have a spare whatever it costs, \$800 laying around, but you can do it in installments. They handle all of that initial paperwork to jumpstart you. But I'm always open to networking with other founders or organizers of nonprofits, because I think we all have a lot to learn from one another.

Collie Turner: And you there's plenty I still don't know, but I'm happy to share what I've already learned for sure.

Anna Taylor: Collie, thanks so much and thanks for the work that you do and all the smiles and wellness that you're bringing to your community.

Collie Turner: Thank you Anna.