

Jesutofe
Salau: Hello to all of our listeners. My name is Tofe and today is another great day to be a social worker. Welcome to social work, amplified a podcast, hosted by speak, speak stands, or social policy, education, advocacy, and knowledge. And our mission is to amplify the voices of social workers by providing resources, increasing students, political engagement, and facilitating networking opportunities. Speak will like to gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Simmons sisters fund. At Texas, I would like to introduce our guest for today's podcast. Leon Theodore. Leon Theodore is a gifted and visionary social architect. He is the Dallas County Project Director for the Texas Center for Justice and Equity. He obtained a graduate degree in social work at Texas A&M commerce, and also a bachelor's degree in social work. He is passionate about social change and equity. He's a proven leader, activist and education justice advocate dedicated to creating positive outcomes for our youth and the communities they inhabit. He founded a direct service nonprofit called destination known work group that provides a so social, emotional learning curriculum for youth aged 11 through 18 in his free time he likes to read and cook. Hello, Leon. How are you doing today?

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Leon
Theodore: How are you today?

Jesutofe
Salau: I'm doing pretty good. We're so excited to have you here. I like how you in your biography that you call yourself a social architect. So what exactly does that mean to you?

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Leon
Theodore: Uh, for me, what that means is building relationships gets you a lot farther than anything in this world. Uh, you can, it opens doors, it closes doors, it provides opportunities. So, what I try to do is construct a working helpful relationship building situation. I didn't say that right, but I like to connect people is the best way I like to connect people so that they can provide opportunities for everyone.

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Jesutofe
Salau: Okay. That makes sense because architects do big. So you're building social relationships. That makes sense. So what led you into obtaining a master's in social work

Leon
Theodore: To be very practical? It was the way I started to get a, to get open the doors that I needed with my bachelor's. I couldn't get what I needed to get it done as far as work for me. Um, with social work it's master's level your masters gets you the pay you need, it opens, it allows you to work in like director jobs different aspects. Um, and it allows some more freedom. So that's what made me just side to do it. Um, what I gained from it was more knowledge about myself and what I wanted to actually go after in social work advocacy.

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Jesutofe
Salau: Oh, yes. That makes sense. So just the master's really helped you enabled you to reach your full potential, especially thought in yourself.

Leon Yes.

Theodore:

Jesutofe So right now you kind of do several things. You work at the Texas Center for Justice
Salau: and Equity as the Dallas County Program Coordinator, but you always do a few, you
also do a few things on the side, such as your nonprofit that you have started. So, you
know, in everything that you do, what made you, you decide you want to concentrate
[00:04:00] in advocacy, social work?

Leon Um, so our organization, I work for the, be to me, I work for the best organization in
Theodore: the world with T C J E we do policy. We don't really do direct service. Um, and we do
advocacy for me with advocacy. It's it's on the ground. It's all about hearing what's on
[00:04:30] the ground. Um, it gives you the most to me, it gives me the most access to the
people that are most in need. Um, so that's what, that's what got me into advocacy is
saying the people that I love suffer not having what they need and it was the easiest
way for me to see the media change.

Jesutofe Okay. So it really allowed you to, like, it really allowed you to like, just do that
Salau: advocacy work that you desired basically

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Leon Interact Yes. To interact with, to interact with clients most directly, which is what
Theodore: drives me. And that helps with my policy work. Yes.

Jesutofe Yeah. So what is it like being the director, can you give us a brief synopsis of like a day
Salau: to day life of being like a, for the Texas center for justice and equity?

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Leon Yes. Uh, it's it's freedom. I love, I love, again, like I said, my job is different, so I'm
Theodore: remote and I get to create investing about being director and specifically for TCJ is
that I get to create my own deliverables, my own directives. Um, so that's what a day
looks like. Um, starting off figuring out what needs to be done for the day. What do
[00:06:00] you need to put in place? What meetings do I need to then who do I need to talk to
that day to accomplish the goal for either the week or the month? It's really not the
same as going into an office. Um, per se, I set my, I just set my schedule for the year.
So I do a court for me. I do quarterly goals. Um, and the day to day is okay, this week I
need to set up some we're looking for a location for an event we're doing. So it's
[00:06:30] setting a up the event. It's pulling everyone, making sure that everyone stays on task.
And when I say stay on task, we're not talking micromanagement, just, you know,
what, what have you accomplished? What do I need to jump in and do to help you
obtain your goals? So it's setting the goals, it's creating the space for people to do
their best and, and to a actually make some outcomes happen. That's that's day to
[00:07:00] day. It's really just managing people and setting directives.

Jesutofe So do you guys have like targeted outcomes or targeted measures that you have to
Salau: reach in a quarter? Like you said, you said quarterly goal or is it just, do you kind of
choose the outcomes and the things to accomplish?

[00:07:30]

Leon

Theodore:

I choose them. I set my own directives and I set a time for myself, a time frame for myself, like, you know, a target goal date. Um, I tell you the biggest thing I've learned is that no matter what you set the time for the date, you set it for, it's probably not going to happen when you want, so you have to learn how to adjust. Yeah. Um, that's been my biggest learning point in being a director is, you know, you want, you have all these things laid out that you want. And then how do you, how do you learn how to adjust? How do you, how to deal with change or things not working out. And then you have to be flexible enough to change direction when needed as well.

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Jesutofe

Salau:

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So, so it seems like your position entails a variety of things, but more than more than anything, you have to be self-driven, you know, like your position, you definitely have to be able to motivate yourself to get the things done. Because like you said, you kind of set your own directives, you kind of work remotely. So, you know, nobody's breathing down your neck, so you kind of have to be you self-driven in your position, which, you know, I feel like as social workers, we are taught to be self-driven and, you know, I kind of see how your self drivenness or your determination kind of led you to starting destination known work group. So can you tell us a little bit about the birth of destination known work group? Like how long has it been in existence and what is the purpose of that nonprofit organization?

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Leon

Theodore:

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So it started as a program itself working with at the time, working with unhoused youth and families, and just understanding that seeing that people didn't have a direction, right? Like we go to school and, and it, it started really with myself, but I, I brought the program into existence while I was working with unhoused youth, youth, but understanding that we go to school and I went to school, didn't know what I wanted to do exactly. Right. So I'm spending money, I'm spending energy reason. We're talking now about with speak, you know, you're trying to help students and people understand that there's direction. You need to have a direction, you need to have a goal. Um, that's where that started. So the program is a goal look program from there. Um, I, after working for a while, you see that our job really is about system work.

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Leon

Theodore:

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So you have to understand the systems that you work in. Um, and when you recognize what's in the system, you see what else is being serviced? What, what service are being provided or, and what are not. So I started bringing providers around me that would help me obtain the goal that I was looking for, which was to improve self-perception emotional intelligence and youth participants in the program finding their goal and learning how to make a plan. So that self-driven, as you talk about the self-direction, like I said, understanding that things don't change, but how do you make the plan? How do you adjust? That's the emotional intelligence? That's the social aspect of that? That's what birth, the destination work group as a whole and destination, the work group has been in existence for three years. The, the program is six.

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Jesutofe

Salau:

Oh, wow. So it is actually, it is comment on 10 years or that seventh year mark. So it has been in existence for a while that you've been working, working on that work

[00:11:30] group. So like before, before destination known, came into existence and you were able to, you know, implement this program, how, like, was there any other program like that was similar to it or was, was there just like a void, a void in that area and you just saw the need and destination, you know, kind of like fulfilled that need that was there.

Leon Theodore: I, I did see a need. Um, again, like I said, I, what really started was the fact that I didn't see any programs that I knew of that specifically helped, did dealt with goal attainment right. In the way in a practical manner. Right. So you know, if you think back to you being in school, you get told, people get told about, you know, you're going to get social work and then, but then you figure out like there's a million things that you can do in social work. And you don't know, and you may have to do this and you go through things before you understand what you want to do. I did the same thing. Um, and the frustration in that was that I didn't land on what I wanted right away. That's and I didn't know any programs similar to mine that were very hands on and very day to day and helped me plan out. I'm not saying that there wasn't, I just didn't see any and those that were specific to young black males and in school I didn't see that. So that's what drove me to create that.

[00:13:00] Jesutofe Salau: Okay. And I really think the name kind of captures the purpose of your organization, destination known, knowing the destination that you're headed to. So I really like that.

Leon Theodore: Yes, yes.

Jesutofe Salau: And I know you also work on the other, I know you also worked on another project. I don't know if you're like heading this project, but it's called perception equals potential. And I know that this program is kind of like under the Texas center for justice and equity organization. So can you tell us a little bit about perception equals potential? What is that program all about?

[00:13:30] Leon Theodore: Yes. So that is the project that that's the project. When I got the position as I said, I love my organization. They, they told me come to Dallas further. Our mission, how you do that is what's important to you. So our mission with TC JC is to end mass incarceration and the and affect the communities that are, I mean, and improve the communities that are affected by mass incarceration. So when you think about that that's black and brown communities specifically black communities. Um, so for me, how I see furthering our mission is education. And again, 11 to 18 perception equal equals potential is an offshoot of destination known the program. Um, it is, I've always believed that how you perceive yourself changes, how you interact with the world and how the inner and how the world interacts with you. Um, what you believe about yourself teaches others, how to interact with you.

[00:14:00] Leon Theodore: So that's what this program is about. It's about teaching middle school youth, specifically the value of themselves through emotional intelligence, through understanding how to improve your with goal attainment, mindfulness, things that help you with your emotional regulation. Um, it was birthed out of ending the school

[00:15:30] to prison pipeline. And I'm not sure if you know much about that. That's a whole nother conversation, but when you talk about ending the school to prison pipeline, it's not, it's not a reaction reactionary event. It, it needs to be preemptive. Um, but how we've approached it has been reactionary. So that means what perception equals potential does is we work with the teachers. We work with the school system, we work with the community. We work with students because to change the whole, to change the whole, you need to interact with, with all parks.

[00:16:00] That's very true to change the whole. You need to interact with all parks. I think that just aligns with the systems theory of social work and, you know, that's actually really true. And I actually have heard about the school to prison pipeline. Um, I actually got my under a degree in criminal justice and that's something that we kind of, I kind of study just, you know, what's that word called? I just skimmed over a little bit. And I just think that's why I wanted to go into social work as well, to do something preventative, because a lot of our, a lot of our responses are reactionary. Like you stated.

[00:16:30] Yes.

Leon Theodore: Yes. Well, you know, how do you, how do you balance, how do you balance running a nonprofit destination known and actually being a project director? Is that something that you kind of have a hard time doing or does everything that you do? I know that does it intertwine with each other and is it, how do you feel, how do you, how do you balance it?

[00:17:00] So I, I, I don't claim to be the, the brightest one on the block, but I did, I do believe in working smart, not hard. So I started because I worked for a policy organization and we do more policy and advocacy and we don't do direct service. Um, I saw what I saw with the need. I saw the need for my program. And I started, like I said, I started building around to, to actually interact with all parts of the community. Right. And when I say the community, I'm talking about the education system. So what I do with TC JC is the outlier, the out the research doing the looking for programs that we can implement places. I do the advocacy and the research with destination known. I do the direct service. So I did, it was, I was intentional in that.

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[00:18:00] Um, it was the ability to act out the things that act out services that would benefit who I was, you know, doing the research for what the policies were impacting. Again, like I said, I, I personally am someone that believes that policy should look like on the groundwork. Right. And a lot of times I understand that policy has to be broad until it doesn't. And historically we have put policies in place that have impacted community communities that were not broad. They were very specific that caused issues and problems. And we have continued with that creation of policy that, that way of creating policy. So yeah, I think policy needs to look like what it, it should affect the ground directly. So yeah, that is why I put those two together. So it's not that difficult.

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Jesutofe

Salau:

I really like what you said, policy should look like on the ground on work, because I was actually going to mention, while you were just responding to the question, how, like, you may, you kind of started off in a macro field T C J E, and that birthed a direct, you know, a direct practice. It birthed something that's micro. And I really think that's the essence of policy, you know, for it to like bird programs and direct services that really affect the individual. It shouldn't just be, you know, a lot of words that are that's over the top of our heads. It should be like, you know, action. So I really like that policy should look like on the groundwork. Wow. Yes,

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Leon

Theodore:

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It should. And it does, it does at times, but, you know we could do better. I'll say it like that. We could do a lot better. We could do a lot better. And we have done in the past when it was beneficial for larger or, or dominant groups we've done. We created on the ground policies that were very specific and very on the ground. They had it affected on the ground really well. So we know that it can be done. It's just, it's just doing it.

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Jesutofe

Salau:

That's really true. We know that it can be done, but it's just doing, we just have to do the work well, what a unique story that you have. And I really like the fact that as social workers, the social work field is already very diverse, but you know, we as individuals, we can also create pathways for ourselves and things create jobs for ourselves. And I think that's kind of what you did, and I'm really just in all of that. So I'm going to go ahead and move into the political questions and we want to just get to know how you maintain like political engagement or how you as a social worker maintain that advocacy that we are called to do as social workers. So although social workers are obligated to remain politically engaged, what are some personal reasons that you choose to remain politically engaged,

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Leon

Theodore:

Uh, day to day living as a, as a black male day to be living. And it's that simple, and it's not just specific to black males or any one group. It is advocacy is born out of your pains, right? Like what, what is, what's bothering you? What, what can't you live with? And for me just getting up every day, I I'm I'm system involved. And if you, if your listeners don't know what that means, I was formally incarcerated. So there's a lot born out of that. Um, there's a lot born out of my personality. Um like what, what irritates me and, and the things that I've experienced. So that, that creates a lot of my passion for advocacy. And I think that's what individuals need to understand or should understand. You don't have to go looking for, for something or jump on, just look at yourself and find out what bothers you. And there you are have it.

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Jesutofe

Salau:

That's very true. That's why I asked the question because sometimes you need to make advocacy personal in order to be effective. So I really like what you said, what bothers you? What irritates you, like you said, and that's, that's the way you're going to actually do of the advocacy work that we're called to do.

Leon Yes.

Theodore:

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Jesutofe

Salau:

So I just want to hear about some of your successes. So in your personal pursuits, in what ways have you seen your engagement in politics yield results? This can be in your area of practice, or it can be outside of your area of practice. Are there any ways that you've seen like results or, or successes, any success stories?

Leon

Theodore:

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Oh yeah. Um, so I, I was some of my biggest successes have been seeing students or participants actually figuring out what they wanted to do, helping someone to start a business, uh helping people. I've had people that are, you know, starting a project and helping them do that. Um, I had a young man biggest compliment I've had in this in last year when I worked at Dallas life, there was a gentleman, I started on the street and I didn't recognize him, but he recognized me and he just went on and on, he said, you don't remember me. And I was like, no, said you changed my life. And, and he no longer on housed, got a job. He's doing all these things. That's those have been, that's the successes for me just to see people figure out their, their pathway or finding their, it doesn't success is not sometimes tangible. It's just understanding that you have value. I I've seen so many people try figure out that they have value again, perception equals potential. So yes, that, that's some of my successes.

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Jesutofe

Salau:

That's good. Success is not always tangible. Sometimes it's those, it's that intangible thing. That's actually, you know, more brings us a more feeling of success than like those tangible things, you know? Yes. So that's really great. Just allowing that young person that you saw, that you saw, you saw that you helped, you know, realize the value in himself. That is definitely a success story.

Leon

Theodore:

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Jesutofe

Salau:

Yes. Yes.

So are there any policies out there right now, whether it be federal state or local that you desire to see changing and what would the bene, what would, what would that, what would be the benefits of this change to the community?

Leon

Theodore:

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Um, so I work a lot around education code 37, check the 37, which is our discipline code. Um, that's too long to change, to like speak about, but the easiest way in anybody that works in policy, if we would get rid of the sh uh, shes or Mays or may, and just make it, you will do this, sh it, you will do this, not may do this, not leave it up to, uh leave it up to whim, right. That would be, if we would take those out and say, let people know what, let educators let the admin know what they have to do and not leave it open. That would be a big change. Um, I, I'm working now. We're about codes of conduct for schools like with district work. Um, I think if the change on the, with district codes of conduct we would see a, a huge reduction in referrals, discipline referrals, we'd see a huge reduction in kids going, being sent to alternative education programming and to the juvenile justice center. So I think we would save some lives. I mean, you, you never know what, how injurious you are a kid being sent, being, seeing themselves as a problem is so yeah, I, that those are my two biggest things,

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[00:27:00] right. Code of conduct specifically in Dallas and surrounding areas and education code 37, uh I'm who those, those shells **in may and Mays are killing me.**

Jesutofe
Salau: Yeah. I asked you that question because it's really as social workers, it's really good to have a one or two policies that you actually really want to see change to really know them. And like really like know, like, what is, what exactly do you want to see change?

[00:27:30] Because, you know, like you said, policies are really broad and the way that they affect us, they can be actually really broad as well, or they can be really specific. So like, we have to really, okay, what exactly needs to be changed in this policy for it to deliver like the way that we want it to be delivered. So I'm really glad, you know, you had some policies on the top of your mind and it really shows that you're really passionate. And you're really like, like you said, those shells, they needs to be
[00:28:00] changed because I think more specific wording can really help, you know, promote equity, which is I, which I believe is what you desire. You know, what we all desire.

Leon
Theodore: Yes. That is true. I'm, I'm glad you said that about equity because we don't like to talk about that, especially in this climate and this time, but really everything that we're talking about when we're specific, when we're talking about education, when we're talking about criminal justice, we're talking about inequities and we're talking about
[00:28:30] our, his history as for this country. And, and if we don't ever start facing that, like I said, that's where I know that laws can be specific, you know, policies can be very specific. So, you know, yeah. Let's just, let's be specific with some equity in mind.

Jesutofe
Salau: Yeah. That's really true. So now we're going to kinda like move on to you, giving
[00:29:00] advice to our listeners, you know, social work students and people like me. So if you could start all over again with social work advocacy, what would you do differently? If anything at all?

Leon
Theodore: I wouldn't do anything different because hindsight, I mean, you know, we can talk about that too, but I saw how every aspect of what I've done has given me a skill to that I utilize. So what I would tell young students it's okay to, to, to try as many things
[00:29:30] as you need, but if you know where you want to go, right, if you figure out what's your real passion, you don't let money drive you, you don't let peer pressure, any of those things. I don't know if it's really peer pressure, I'm trying to say, but don't let it let money or community direct your thoughts or your, you know, what you want to
[00:30:00] do and actually ask questions. We're so we're, we do not like asking questions, right? Get some mentors, figure out while you have, while it's safe, figure out, get some mentors and find out is that really you want to do, is that really where you want to go? Um, that I think that would be my biggest thing for young students is to reach out
[00:30:30] to some mentors and, and, and just ask, doesn't matter how many nerves you get on, or how many, you know, ask as many questions that you, you can volunteer as much as you possibly can and try things, but you don't necessarily have to, and don't believe that you have to be stuck in one thing. So, yes,

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Jesutofe
Salau: That's some really good advice. I mean, I think I like how you started off, you can try as many things as you want. And sometimes stats, you know, necessary because like

[00:31:30] growing up or being a new social worker or social work student, you don't really know exactly, cuz there's so many, you know, problems in this world. You don't, you don't really know exactly what, what is the one that you're most passionate about? So, you know, it's okay. Try several things. And then, you know, in pursuit of that, ask a lot of questions because I think asking questions is really what kind of, you know, gives you a better understanding of that situation or that, that socio so social problem and stuff like that. So that's a really good advice and I really thank you for that and I appreciate it. So we're going to end up with this question. Um, I know, like in this conversation you kind of mentioned how you're passionate about the criminal justice system, the education system, you know, because of your personal, you know, life. So how do you engage people in the cause that you're so passionate about? So this is your passion.

[00:32:00] How do you get people to get on board with that and help support that and promote like, you know, advocacy in that area.

Leon
Theodore: Um, you have to, what I try to do, I'm working on something now educational advocacy services, and I'm what I want, what I'm trying to do is use social workers, interns, right? And the reason I'm doing that is to give students and lay persons as well a way to space so that they can figure out how they want to approach the situ the situation, right? The, the, the issue, if I make space for them, show them what it's about, show them and show them that their aspect or their perspective on the issue is valid know because a lot of us, a lot of people want to, we want to follow, right.

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[00:33:00] Which I understand because that's easy. But your aspect of on the issue is very valid. It's very, it's viable. If I can help you see help you see how to make that your approach viable, then I've done my job.

Leon
Theodore: That's how I bring people to the table on education. That's how I would, I want students to understand there is no set way to chop down a tree, right? Cause you have to go all the way around the tree. You got to do it. Your angle may be better than mine. It just worked for me because it was my personality. It was my experience. But there's some things that you can do that you can create traction on, on, on ending this issue. But I have to make it re I have to make it viable to you. And I think that's what I, I, that's my biggest way of helping people join on board, letting them know

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[00:34:00] that they're viable, their thoughts and their perspective is viable.

Jesutofe
Salau: Hmm. That's good. So I don't know if I'm hearing the correct thing. So you said you engage people by, you know, just giving them, you kind of teach them, you educate, like you educate them about the problem and how comedian impacts them or whatever. And then you leave it up to them to choose the way that they're going to engage or participate in the situation. Is that what I'm? Is that what you're saying?

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[00:35:00] Yes. Okay. Yes. That's, that's really good. Yeah, because I was just thinking while you were responding, how, you know, some people, they might, you know, there's different forms of advocacy. There's, you can go some March, you can send a letter to your representative. You can, you know, post on social media about it. You can also like support monetarily and just knowing that, you know, whatever way that that person choose to support. It's also, it's a viable way. It's, it's helping the cause at the end of the day. And that's really, that's really good knowing that people don't have to, like, maybe you like marching, maybe that person doesn't like marching, they can just

send money or, you know, something like that. And that really helps people engage in a cause that sure. So passionate about,

Leon
Theodore:
[00:35:30] Yeah. A lot of people, we don't understand that that is, that's a human thing though. You know, our way is the only way, our way is the best way, but you, that that's part of, I think what we do as social workers, you know, you have to understand you're, you're taking the time to help other people see that they are, they have a voice that what they see and think about is, is worthwhile. Their perception of themselves is perfect. Um, what they need to change, they need to change. So yeah, that's, that's my per

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Jesutofe
Salau: Yeah. Thank you for that great advice. I'm really just kind of just encouraged, I guess, by the advice that you gave, knowing that, you know, you know, advocacy can exist in different forms and I'm pretty sure the, our listeners are also kind of encouraged and they have some good takeaways from today's podcast session. So thank you, Leon, for spending time with me today,

Leon
Theodore:
Jesutofe
Salau:
[00:36:30] I was honored to be here. Thank you.
Yes. Thank you to all of our listeners for joining us for another episode of social work amplified, I hope you were able to learn something today that empowered you to become more politically engaged and helps you shape a better tomorrow until next time