



Episode 10 – “Eden Village: A Tiny Home Community for the Chronically Homeless in Harrisburg” Transcript

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am one of your hosts, Melissa Turnpaugh, youth development coordinator with the Center For Schools and Communities.

Matt Butensky:

And I am your cohost, Matt Butensky, project manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. Thanks for joining us for this episode of the I Will Be Your Voice Podcast. On today's episode, we are speaking with Jon and Raquel Bomberger. We want to welcome Jon and Raquel to the podcast. Welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Jon Bomberger:

Thanks for having us. We're excited to be here.

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes, thank you.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. We are excited to be back. We've had a very short hiatus of the “I Will Be Your Voice” podcast. We last released an episode in December 2023, so this is our first podcast episode of 2024. We're so excited to hear more about Eden Village today. Thanks again for being here.

Raquel Bomberger:

Thank you.

Jon Bomberger:

Absolutely.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Just to give a little backstory, we like to give our listeners the connection that we have when we have different guest speakers come on. I've known you guys, oh man, I'm thinking 10 years, more than 10 years. I used to babysit your kids, with your oldest daughter, which is crazy. Yeah, it's great to have you guys here, and just the continued work that you guys are doing in the community and have always done by giving help to others. Thanks for being here.

Jon Bomberger:

Absolutely.

Matt Butensky:

Melissa knows everybody. That's what we've found from recording this podcast. Melissa Turnpaugh knows everybody.

Raquel Bomberger:

Yeah.

Matt Butensky:

Of course. Of course you do, Melissa.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Awesome. We're super excited to have you guys here today. I just would like to start off, can you guys tell us just a little bit about how Eden Village Harrisburg began, what the backstory is? Just so our listeners have a better idea of how it started.

Matt Butensky:

What is it?

Jon Bomberger:

Yeah. Eden Village Harrisburg really just grew out of desire for us to just live out our faith in a practical way. Years ago, we were part of a group of friends that we'd been meeting together for some time, and we were just looking for ways to serve the community in practical ways. We all had, everybody in the group, had some kind of connection to real estate. My wife and I are both in the real estate industry. Some of us are investors, landlords, things like that. We decided that with that commonality, we felt like maybe there was something there, so we wanted to look at how we could meet people's needs relate to housing.

In my role as a real estate broker, I read a lot of publications and articles about the industry. In one of those articles that I read was for an agent named Linda Brown, out in Springfield, Missouri, who won the National Association of Realtor's award, their Good Neighbor Award that year. She won that award for, along with her husband David, opening the first Eden Village in Springfield, Missouri. I read that article and I was intrigued. Literally, I cold-called Linda. She didn't know who I was. I was just like, "That's really interesting," and just talked to her about what she was doing and how she started it. She introduced me to Nate Schlueter, who's the chief visionary officer for Eden Village. Got on the phone with him, and one meeting led to the next, and we just continued to go down that road and explore what it would look like to copy that model in Harrisburg. That's how we started, just what can we do in our community?

Raquel Bomberger:

Yeah. Then, 2020 hit and it was like, "We have all this time. Let's dig some more."

Matt Butensky:

If our listeners have never heard of Eden Village or what it is, can you share with us what is Eden Village? And just more about what it is.

Jon Bomberger:

Yeah. I think village is the operative word in terms of it takes a village type of thing. It takes a village to raise a child or whatever, not that we're serving children necessarily. But, we're looking to serve the homeless community by providing housing first. There's a lot of really great organizations in the Capital Area that serve the homeless community, doing a variety of different

things. There are very few that approach the issue from a housing first perspective. That's our goal. But it's not just housing, we're not building just housing, we're building community. I guess that's what I would say. We're a community, we're trying to teach people how to be good neighbors and provide that support system for them.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

That's awesome. For those who may live in the Capital Area or may not be familiar, where exactly in Harrisburg are you guys hoping that land, and ground and the community will be built at?

Raquel Bomberger:

Well, we actually have land right next to another project that is actually serving the homeless veterans, so maybe you guys have heard of that one. We're building right next to them. That's where the Harrisburg PennDOT building is, Front Street there. Yeah. That's where we have it. Now, we're in the process of getting funds, and doing fundraisers and getting the word out, because now that you have land, you have bills.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Very true.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Eden Village doesn't exist yet. It's at its first phases of the planning process and you've secured land.

Raquel Bomberger:

That's correct.

Matt Butensky:

What has it been like building up to that point? What kind of challenges did you have even getting to this point of moving forward with an Eden Village here in Pennsylvania? Is there another Eden Village anywhere else in PA or the Northeast?

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Jon Bomberger:

Yes.

Raquel Bomberger:

There are a few. There's in Tulsa, there's one in Wilmington.

Jon Bomberger:

Yeah. Springfield, Missouri, Linda Brown I had mentioned earlier, they're the ones that started it in Springfield. They have now three villages that are built and operational today in Springfield, Missouri. There's one that's open and operational with residents in Wilmington, North Carolina. There's one opening soon in Richmond, Virginia. She mentioned Tulsa, Oklahoma. There's probably 15 other cities that I haven't even mentioned that are in some sort of process, just like we are, looking to open this type of model.

There are some things that unique about Eden Village specifically, and I think that whole community concept is one of those distinguishing things. But, tiny homes aren't necessarily a

new concept. We didn't invent that. But I think the whole support model around that community is a little bit unique to Eden Village. Eden Village Harrisburg is not built yet. It is certainly a thing in terms of we are an established 501C3 non-profit organization and are doing some work to get to the point where we have residents.

Raquel Bomberger:

Yeah. It was a challenge trying to find land because there's zoning, and how do we get ... We can purchase land, and maybe the zoning's right, but then there's more costs when it's okay, is this the right property that we can get electricity here, or the water here, the sewer here? We're trying to find land that also will not take so much of our funds just in the land part, if that makes sense.

Jon Bomberger:

The development, yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:

Yeah, the development part. Yes, it was a challenge.

Jon Bomberger:

Well, location was important too because there is-

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Jon Bomberger:

There is already, for those people that know what Tent City is, there is a whole group of homeless individuals that are living in tents, therefore the name of the city. We wanted to be easy access to that, and certainly other services, and make it convenient. Why would we move all these people out to the middle of-

Raquel Bomberger:

Nowhere.

Jon Bomberger:

Yeah, it's beautiful, it's great. But now, you don't have access to services, maybe it's harder for you to get there, so location was definitely important.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Did you face a lot of resistance from the community about creating an Eden Village here, or was the community really supportive of hopefully making improvements to what you just referred to as a Tent City? What has that looked like for you in your mission?

Raquel Bomberger:

Funny you should ask that because timing is everything. As we're trying to understand our group, what we want to do and how we want to serve the community, while we're doing the research on Eden Village and where we can actually find land, Harrisburg City was having this issue with the homeless people. They were being scrutinized by how they're approaching the homeless people in certain locations. That was already stirring up, "What are you going to do? No, what are you going to do?" Everyone's pointing fingers. "Isn't this your responsibility?" And things like that.

When this other group came into play for the Veterans, they started all that. A lot of the issues, they pretty much took the brunt of it I think. Now, we're coming behind them-

Matt Butensky:
Got it.

Raquel Bomberger:
And it's not as bad.

Matt Butensky:
Got it.

Raquel Bomberger:
But the whole point is just educating people and letting them know, "This is what it is, this is what we're trying to do. This is how we're going to work together. This is the solution." Then, telling the people especially in Harrisburg City, "This is how you can be a part of it."

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
We're not ... What would be the word? It's nothing new. You go to Harrisburg City, you see the homeless people there. You go to New York City, you go to Philly, you see the homeless people there. The new part is how can we properly serve them? Giving them a home, because they don't have one, is almost like why didn't someone think of that?

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
Does that make sense?

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
I think as we approach people, and businesses, and the city, and outside of the city, and we let them know we're giving them a home and other services, and providing a community to people, like Jon said.

Jon Bomberger:
Well, what I would say is, again, it's not just a home. I think there's a lot of studies, and you can understand that there's subsidized housing, government housing, I don't think it's enough to, and I think where some programs perhaps have fallen short is you provide the housing, and then just let them figure it out. A lot of times, people need those extra support services in order to really be independent. Independent, but not independent. We all need support.

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Jon Bomberger:

[inaudible 00:11:57].

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
There's an involved community. Eden Village is intentionally involving yourself in their life and it's not just, "Here's a check. Bye. Here's a can of whatever. Bye." This is an intentional relationship.

Matt Butensky:
Will there be someone, or is there some type of case work that's done with the residents when the village is created to help connect them to services and planning on that part?

Jon Bomberger:
Yeah. When we get closer to actually opening the homes, we will hire a community director who will be onsite. Then, a lot of the work and the support services we talked about will be part of that community will also have a community center, where perhaps people from some of our local hospitals, or clinicians, or whatever can come and provide some of those services. Whether it's mental health, or medical, or-

Raquel Bomberger:
Counseling.

Jon Bomberger:
Counseling. Job skills, financial skills, those kinds of things. A lot of our work to this point has been in establishing some of those relationships.

Raquel Bomberger:
We're not just looking for funds, we're also looking to partner up with people.

Jon Bomberger:
With people.

Raquel Bomberger:
And say, "This is what's coming, join us."

Jon Bomberger:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
Also, not recreating things. There are services already in place and we want to tell them, "Come here, please. Share it here."

Jon Bomberger:
Let's partner.

Raquel Bomberger:
Let's do it together.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, cool. You talked about the land, you're in the land development phase. What is your timeline for, ideally, when might we see the village and might residents be able to start living in Eden Village in Harrisburg?

Jon Bomberger:

Yeah. Unfortunately, development can take some time. We'd love to see shovels in the ground by the later part of this year, which would put our opening to residents probably the later part of next year. Or, late fall. It's going to take some time to get all of the development things. Now, with some of those projects already being established there, it might be a little bit easier. It might actually speed up our process a little bit. But yeah, we're hoping that 2025, we'll be opening homes to people.

Raquel Bomberger:

But that is also depending on the funds.

Matt Butensky:

I was just going to ask that. You're still actively looking to secure additional funds?

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Matt Butensky:

Well, maybe, you never know where one of our listeners may be from when they hear more about Eden Village Harrisburg. How many residents are you hoping to accommodate here in Harrisburg?

Jon Bomberger:

Yeah. We're still working on design. For the piece of land that we have an agreement on, we're probably going to be 26 to 28 homes, depending on exactly how all of that finishes.

Matt Butensky:

They're tiny homes?

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Jon Bomberger:

Correct.

Matt Butensky:

Okay.

Jon Bomberger:

They're 400 square feet. You can be completely independent. Full size kitchen, full size bathroom, ADA compliant living area.

Matt Butensky:

Is it one person per tiny home, or could there be-

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Matt Butensky:
It's a single dwelling.

Raquel Bomberger:
For this community, correct.

Jon Bomberger:
Yeah, that's correct. Some of the other villages that we partnered with that are doing this very thing have made some exceptions for couples. But generally speaking, we're just looking for individuals.

Melissa Turnpaugh:
When you're-

Raquel Bomberger:
For the first-

Melissa Turnpaugh:
Oh, go ahead. How you're talking about having these individuals come into the home, hopefully having 26 to 28 different ones, possibly more, possibly less, do you guys have certain requirements that you're going to be asking of these individuals or families that might be moving in? And do they have a timeframe? Is their home for X amount of months, years? Can you give us more information based on that?

Jon Bomberger:
Yeah, absolutely. Good question. We have a fairly lengthy application process. Our application is 20-pages long. It can look overwhelming, but we're certainly there to help them through that process. In addition to our application process, we're really looking for individuals who meet the government definition of chronically homeless. Someone who's been homeless for the last 12 months consecutively, or have four periods of homelessness over the last three years. That's one. Two is they have some sort of disability, whether it's mental or physical. They must have a proof of income to be able to pay \$350 a month. It's not for a period of time, this community's designed to be their forever home. They can come and they can say, "This is where I live." That's the goal and we hope that we find 26, 28 individuals who are like, "I want to live in a place and set my roots." It's easy for us to take for granted, the fact that we live in a place and we're able to do all of these things. That housing piece and having a home is so key to growth and development of the individual.

Melissa Turnpaugh:
Very much so. Will these homes already be fully equipped for them, like furniture? Are you guys working with different partnerships that are going to donate? Do you guys have any type of idea of what you're going to do for layouts for that?

Jon Bomberger:
That's part of the donor opportunities. It's not just in acquiring and development costs, and community center and all of that stuff, it's also not just the construction of the homes, but let's furnish these things for people so everything's going to be brand new for people.

Raquel Bomberger:
Individuals can adopt a home and name it, furnish it.

Melissa Turnpaugh:
I love that.

Raquel Bomberger:
Put whatever you can think.

Jon Bomberger:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
Businesses can do the same. Anyone can adopt a home and create whatever they want. Then also, we would encourage everyone that, along with adopting a home, is connect with the person that's going to live there and become their person.

Melissa Turnpaugh:
Wow.

Jon Bomberger:
Their friend, yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
Their friend. The community, that's the gist of it.

Jon Bomberger:
Yeah. There's a lot of data and research that tells us what are some of the causes of homelessness, and all of them are probably correct, but we believe at Eden Village that one of the main reasons for homelessness is the catastrophic loss of family or the family structure. You can probably think of people in your lives that, if not for a family member, they could be in that situation as well. We're trying to fill that gap. We may not necessarily be family, but we can be your community.

Melissa Turnpaugh:
Yeah, that's great. I think that's awesome you guys are giving the ability for people to adopt a home, and get to know and connect them to other resources, and having that confidante that they can build relationship with.

With them having to have a job and meeting the income to pay rent for 350, is that also utilities included? Is there a contract, when they're applying for this, that they have to maintain a job, if they don't have a job, how you foresee that process working? Or is it still things you're processing?

Jon Bomberger:
No, we're pretty clear on that. 350 is all in. Not necessarily that they need to maintain a job, certainly there's got to be a proof of income. If they don't have a job out in the community somewhere, the villages and we would envision doing the same thing, is getting them involved in that community somehow, having some kind of responsibility. Just like anybody else that lives in our area, you pay something for where you live, you have some kind of responsibility and you take care of those things. We're doing the same thing.

Matt Butensky:

It sounds like an interesting opportunity too, when you're thinking about obviously you have certain eligibility requirements, but I'm sure that, when the village is created, obviously service providers in Harrisburg will be aware that this is a resource, how do we get this person to meet these eligibility requirements? It'll be a partnership of collaborating to get referrals and vice versa.

Raquel Bomberger:
Correct.

Matt Butensky:
Yeah. One thought, we just talked about types of services and we talked about making referrals, not recreating services if they exist in the community. Are there any other services that Eden Village will potentially be providing to its residents that we might not have covered already? Or did we talk through that so far?

Raquel Bomberger:
Well, there is a garden, so food for the community will come out of there as well and they will participate. For our community center, we envision two sides of it. One part where it directly affects the people that live in Eden Village, and because not everyone can live there that needs it, the other section could be one who supports and helps the people outside. Showers are really important. Food is important. Clothes, certain things like that, that they need, we can provide it from that community center.

Matt Butensky:
That's pretty cool.

Raquel Bomberger:
Then, the doctors can serve both outside and inside of the community.

Matt Butensky:
That's really cool.

Raquel Bomberger:
We're not separating and we're not pushing people away, but we're going to be there as a community, helping in and out. If that answers your question?

Matt Butensky:
Yeah. That's really awesome because, obviously like you said, and I don't know if you have any numbers or there's been any research that you had to conduct on the city of Harrisburg, but I imagine that there will be more people eligible than what the village could have capacity for. Your heads are shaking. Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
Yeah.

Jon Bomberger:
That's what they're experiencing in a lot of the other villages is long wait lists. We anticipate something similar. The Capital Area Coalition on Homelessness puts out, I don't know if it's every year, but probably every other year, a point in time survey. The latest survey says that there's about a little over 400 individuals right now who are homeless in the Capital Area. 26 to 28 will put a small dent in that, but one at a time, right?

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Raquel Bomberger:
As long as we open this first Eden Village, then the possibility and the realness of is going to show a light to the actual issue, and then a solution. Then hopefully, as a community, as the city, we can continue to work together and say, "Okay, let's put another gated community here." Or maybe, because there are people that they don't want to leave the homeless community, so how can we give them a safe place, a warm place during different seasons where they can come and still have somewhere to sleep at night that's good? Then it opens that. Hey, there could be Eden Village pods. I don't know if you guys have heard about these pods?

Matt Butensky:
No.

Raquel Bomberger:
There's just different things that we can do to help either give them a permanent home or give them a safe place.

Matt Butensky:
Yeah. What are the pods? Sorry. We have to talk about the pods for a minute, because I know people will be curious what that means.

Raquel Bomberger:
A pod, it's exactly what it sounds like. It's just this small, considered a tent but hard shell, and there's a bed.

Matt Butensky:
Okay.

Raquel Bomberger:
To keep you safe from elements, let's say here for example if it's too hot, they have somewhere they can sleep where it's cool. Right now, it's winter so they have somewhere they can sleep where it's warm. It's warm, it's clean, you're protected and you're in an area where you don't feel that you're going to get kicked out. Because the problem with tents is that you get to a point where they're telling you, "Nope, you can't sleep here. Nope, you cannot have a tent here." That's the issue. But if there's a piece of land dedicated just for that, then you can just go there.

Jon Bomberger:
What she's talking about is something that's been done, again in Springfield, where they already have three villages. But they have this area that's gated, and they have these little popup trailers that have power in them, they're warm for when it's cold, and people can stay in them on a nightly basis as needed. It's not a long-term solution like Eden Village is, but it could one of those things that develops out of it.

What I was going to say earlier is Harrisburg is interesting because, unlike some of the other cities we're already in, the greater Harrisburg area encompasses a lot more than just Harrisburg City. It's possible that something pops up in Carlisle, or some of those neighboring, smaller cities. That's for the future and to be determined.

Matt Butensky:
Yeah.

Melissa Turnpaugh:
That's awesome. I know that we touched a lot on the aspect of community and needing funds to really help the Eden Village grow and come to the expectation of what you guys are looking for. What are ways that people in the community can get involved now? Are there any types of events that are helping with fundraising that you can share out, that we can make sure our listeners are aware of?

Jon Bomberger:
[inaudible 00:26:06].

Raquel Bomberger:
We are in need, in the next five months, we have to raise 600,000. By the end of this year, roughly 700,000 because that covers a lot of expenses that come with the land and other things that we need to do to be able to start Eden Village. That's just for this year.

We do have a fundraiser happening on March 2nd. It is a cornhole fundraiser. It's a tournament.

Jon Bomberger:
A little cornhole tournament, so it should be a good time.

Raquel Bomberger:
It's just be able to just spread the word and have fun at the same time. But, it's always open for anyone to just go to our webpage, or our GoFundMe page, or our Facebook page and just look up different areas to help and ways to donate. Honestly, spread the word. Talk to whoever. It doesn't matter where you live. That's the best way to help Eden Village because there's someone out there that would like to say, "Hey, if you can match this amount, I'll match."

Jon Bomberger:
Right.

Raquel Bomberger:
Stuff like that, it happens, which is really cool.

Jon Bomberger:
Really, our biggest need right now is the funds. In addition to that cornhole tournament, which should be a good time, we do have an event coming up in May as well, May 17th if I'm remembering that correctly off the top of my head. It's more of a gala type of event in partnership with Mental Health Associates. We're looking forward to that event. That'll be at the West Shore Country Club, and the time I think is 5:30 PM. Oh, I should have had that prepared.

Raquel Bomberger:
Well, we'll get that.

Jon Bomberger:
We do have those two fundraising events coming up.

Raquel Bomberger:
If anyone whose listening, if they have-

Jon Bomberger:

Oh, I was going to say is we do have a private donor who said they were willing to match up to \$50,000.

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Jon Bomberger:

For funds raised-

Raquel Bomberger:

By June.

Jon Bomberger:

Until the end of June.

Raquel Bomberger:

Yeah.

Matt Butensky:

Okay.

Raquel Bomberger:

That's another one.

Matt Butensky:

You were talking a little bit about there could be, down the road, sponsor opportunities of certain homes and things like that. Are those available now or already laid out, and things like that?

Jon Bomberger:

They are, yeah.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah.

Jon Bomberger:

We have a great donor packet that lays all those ideas out.

Matt Butensky:

That's awesome. Well, I know it's a long process but it is a worthwhile one, obviously. Melissa, we were laughing at the cornhole discussion because Melissa is a cornhole champion. If there will be a competition where you need someone on your team, where she needs to win so you get more money, you might want to recruit Melissa. She could do a trial with you.

Jon Bomberger:

You got to be there, Melissa.

Raquel Bomberger:

Melissa, it's a tournament. This is a whole new world for us. I find it so interesting, it's legit. People, they come with their jerseys and they're like, "Well, I'm the national whatever, whatever of cornhole in this section." I'm like, "Awesome, let's go."

Melissa Turnpaugh:

Oh, man. Yeah, I'm going to have to get a jersey made then, for sure.

Raquel Bomberger:

It'll be so much fun. So much fun. We're trying to find ways like that to not just, "Hey, guys, come, give us money." No, let's have fun, let's learn about Eden Village, let's help each other out. Anyone whose listening, if they really want to know what is going on, we do have a Facebook page, Eden Village of Harrisburg. We also have edenvillageharrisburg.org. Those are two spots that someone can just check out and get more information. Our Facebook, I do my best to keep people updated on what's happening. We're excited about that.

Matt Butensky:

Gotcha.

Raquel Bomberger:

They can get on there.

Matt Butensky:

That's amazing. I love how you shared the origin story and how your careers are in realty. Are you realtors? What do you-

Raquel Bomberger:

Yes.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Obviously, it's amazing that this is your day job but you're really helping housing insecure people and trying to find solutions that are housing insecure. What a great tie-in, that's just really cool.

Melissa, are you going to close out our episode today? Is there anything else you wanted to share with our listeners before Melissa closes us out?

Raquel Bomberger:

That we're very grateful for this time and for people to take the time to just listen, and those people that go beyond listening and they want to be a part of it. Thank you. That's all it really takes. There are a lot of things that are not okay with this world, but if we can just do our little part, it goes a long way. It really does.

Melissa Turnpaugh:

It does ripple effect, firmly believe in that. Yeah, awesome. Thank you so much for being with us today. Super excited to see the Eden Village unfold. Hopefully, we continue to reach those goals for funds and having people come out to your events.

But with that message, we're going to close out our episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you, Jon and Raquel, for being with us today.

Jon Bomberger:

Thanks for having us.

Matt Butensky:

Awesome. And with today's show notes, we'll be posting all of the links to your sites, like Facebook and your website, so that people can find you and learn more about the great work of Eden Village. We're so excited to see the progress unfold over the next few months and years. Again, thanks for listening to this episode of I Will Be Your Voice: Stories of Homelessness and Hope. We hope you enjoyed our episode today with Eden Village. Please check back and tune in again.